

Synopsis:

An action packed science fiction novella from master story teller Kate Wilhelm.

A woman who teaches college level history gives up her career to write a book about eagles. But soon she finds that she was manipulated into making the decision by a shadowy man who claims to be a government agent. She is drawn deeper and deeper into a situation that she can hardly understand, and that leads her to places beyond her imagination.

The Winter Beach

By

Kate Wilhelm

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HUGH LASATER stood with his back to the window watching Lloyd Pierson squirm. They were in Pierson's office, a room furnished with university-issue desk and book shelves, as devoid of personality as Pierson himself was. He was one of those men no one after the fact could ever identify, so neutral he could vanish in a mist, become one with a landscape, and never be seen again.

Lloyd Pierson stopped fidgeting with his pencil and took a deep breath. "I can't do it," he said primly, examining the pencil. "It would be unethical, and besides she would appeal. She might even have a sex discrimination case."

"She won't appeal. Believe me, she won't make a stink."

Pierson shook his head. He glanced at his watch, then confirmed what he had learned by looking at the wall clock.

Lasater suppressed a laugh.

"You do it, or I go over your head," he said mildly. "It's a funny thing how people hate having this kind of decision shoved at them when it could have been handled on a lower level. You know?"

“You have no right!” Pierson snapped. He looked at Lasater, then quickly away again. “This is insufferable.”

“Righto. Dean McCrory, isn't it? I just happen to have his number here somewhere. I suppose your secretary would place the call for me?” He searched his notebook, then stopped, holding it open.

“I want to talk to your supervisor, your boss, whoever that is.”

Lasater shrugged. “Got a piece of paper? I'll write the number for you.” Pierson handed him a note pad and he jotted down a number. “That's a Washington area code. Dial it yourself, if you don't mind. You have an outside line, don't you? And his is a direct line, it'll be his private secretary who answers. Just tell him it's about the bird-of-prey business. He'll put you through.”

“Whose private secretary?”

“Secretary of Defense,” Lasater said, as if surprised that Pierson had not recognized the number.

“I don't believe you.” He dialed the number.

Lasater turned to look out the window. The campus was a collage of red brick buildings, dirty snow, and too many people of an age. God, how tired he would get of so many young people all the time with their mini-agonies and mini-crises, and mini-triumphs. Unisex reigned here; in their dark winter garments they all looked alike. The scene was like an exercise in perspective: same buildings, same snow, same vague figures repeated endlessly. He listened to Pierson parrot his message about bird of prey, and a moment later:

“Never mind. Sorry to bother you. I won't wait. It's all right.”

Lasater smiled at the bleak landscape, but when he turned to the room there was no trace of humor on his face. He retrieved the note paper, put it in an ashtray, and set it afire. After it was burned he crushed the ashes thoroughly, then dumped them into the waste can. He held the pad aslant and studied the next piece of paper, then slipped the pad into a pocket. He kept his amusement out of his voice when he said, “You will never use that number again, or even remember that you saw such a number. In fact, this entire visit is classified, and everything about it. Right?”

Pierson nodded miserably. Lasater felt only contempt for him now; he had not fought hard enough for anything else. “So, you just tell her no dice on a leave of absence. You have about an hour before she'll get here; you'll think of a dozen good reasons why your department can't do without her services.” He picked up his coat and hat from the chair where he had tossed them and left without looking back.

Lyle Taney would never know what happened, he thought with satisfaction, pausing to put his coat on at the stairs of the history department building. He went to the student union and had a malted milk shake, picked up a poetry review magazine, bought a pen, and then went to his car and waited. Most of the poetry was junk, but some of it was pretty good, better than he had expected. He reread one of the short

pieces. Nice. Then he saw her getting out of her car. Lyle Taney was medium height, a bit heavy for his taste; he liked willowy women and she was curvy and dimply. Ten pounds, he estimated; she could lose ten pounds before she would start to look gaunt enough to suit him. He liked sharp cheekbones and the plane of a cheek without a suggestion of roundness. Her hair was short and almost frizzy it was so curly, dark brown with just a suggestion of gray, as if she had frosted it without enough bleach to do a thorough job. He knew so much about her that it would have given her a shock to realize anyone had recorded such information and that it could be retrieved. He knew her scars, her past illnesses, her college records, her income and expenses ... She was bouncy: he grinned at her tripping nimbly through the slush at the curb before the building. That was nice, not too many women were still bouncy at her age: thirty-seven years, four months, sixteen days.

She vanished inside the building. He glanced at his watch and made a bet with himself. Eighteen minutes. It would take eighteen minutes. Actually it took twenty-two. When she reappeared, the bounce was gone. She marched down the stairs looking straight ahead, plowed through the slush, crossed the street without checking for traffic, daring anyone to touch her. She got to her car and yanked the door open, slid in, and drove off too fast. He liked all that. No tears. No sentimental look around at the landscape. Just good old-fashioned determination. Hugh Lasater liked to know everything about the people he used. This was data about Lyle Taney that no one would have been able to tell him. He felt that he knew her a little better now than he had that morning. He was whistling tunelessly as he turned on his key, started the rented car, and left the university grounds. She would do, he told himself contentedly. She would do just fine.

Lyle put on coffee and paced while she waited for it. On the table her book looked fragile suddenly, too nebulous to support her entire weight, and that was what it had to do. The book had a flying hawk on the cover; sunlight made the rufous tail look almost scarlet. The book was about hawks, about the word *hawk*, about hawk-like people. It was not natural history, or ornithology, or anything in particular, but it had caught on, and it was having a moderate success. A fluke, of course, such a long shot it could never happen again. She was not a writer, and she really knew nothing about birds in general and hawks in particular, except what she had researched and observed over the five years it had taken her to do the book. The book was so far removed from her own field of history that it was not even counted as a publication by her department.

Her former department, she corrected herself, and poured coffee, then sat down at the table with it and stared at the book, and went over the luncheon one more time.

Bobby Conyers, her editor for the hawk book, and Mal Levinson from the magazine *Birds* had insisted that a follow-up book on eagles would be equally successful.

“Consider it, Lyle,” Mal had said earnestly, on first-name basis instantly. “We want the article. I know ten thousand isn't a fortune, but we'll pick up your expenses, and

it'll add up. And Bobby can guarantee fifteen thousand up front for the book. Don't say no before you think about it."

"But I don't know anything at all about eagles, nothing. And Oregon? Why there? There are eagles in other places, surely."

Mal pointed to the clipping he had brought with him: a letter to the editor of a rival magazine, it mentioned the bald eagles seen along a stretch of Oregon beach for two years in a row, suggesting they were nesting in the vicinity.

"That part of Oregon looks like the forest primeval," he said. "And eagles, bald eagles, are on the endangered list. That may be the last nesting site on the west coast. It'll make a terrific article and book. Believe us, we both agree, it'll be even better than *Hawks*. I'd like to call it *Bird of Prey*."

Bobby was nodding. "I agree, Lyle. It'll go." She sipped her coffee, her gaze still on the book. In her briefcase were contracts, a map of Oregon, another one of that section of coast, and a Xerox copy of an article on eagles that Mal had dug out of back issues of his magazine.

"What if I can't find the nest?" she had asked, and with the question she had realized she was going to do it.

"It's pretty hard to hide an eagle's nest," Mal had said, grinning, knowing she had been persuaded. He began to talk about eagles then, and for the rest of the hour they spent together, it had been as if they all knew she would go to Oregon, search the jagged hills for the nest, set up a photography blind, start digging for facts, tidbits, myths, whatever else took her fancy to make up a full-length book.

And she did want to do it, she told herself again firmly, and tried not to think of what it would mean if the book failed, if she could not find the nest, if the eagles were not nesting there this year, if ... if ... if ... She would have to face Pierson and ask for her job back, or go somewhere else and start over. She thought briefly of filing a claim of discrimination against Pierson and the university, but she put it out of mind again. Not her style. No one had forced her to quit, and no one guaranteed a leave of absence for a job unrelated to her field. Pierson had pointed this out to her in his most reasonable tone, the voice that always made her want to hit him with a wet fish. The fleeting thought about the statistics of women her age getting work in their own fields went unheeded as she began to think seriously about the difficulties of finding an eagle's nest in the wooded, steep hills of the coast range of Oregon.

Presently she put the book on a chair and spread out the coastal map and began to study it. The nest would be within a mile or two of the water, and the exact places where the bird had been seen were clearly marked. An area roughly five to eight miles by two miles. It would be possible, with luck, and if the bird watcher had been right, and if the eagles came back this year...

Lyle sat on the side of her bed talking on the phone. During the past week she had

packed up most of the things she would take with her, and had moved into her study those things she did not want her subleasees to use. She would lock that door and keep the key. Almost magically the problems had been erased before her eyes. She was listening to her friend Jackie plead for her to reconsider her decision, and her mind was roaming over the things yet to be done. A cashier's check to open an account with in the village of Salmon Key, and more film and developer paper...

"Jackie, it's not as if I were a child who never left home before," she said, trying to keep the edge off her voice. "And I tell you I am sick and tired of teaching. I hadn't realized how tired of it I was until I quit. My God! Those term papers!"

She was grateful a moment later when the doorbell cut the phone call short. "Lunch? Sure. I'll be there," she said and hung up, and then went to open the door.

The man was close to six feet, but stooped; he had a big face. She seldom had seen features spread out quite as much as his were: wide-spaced eyes with heavy long lashes and thick sable-brown brows, a nose that would dominate a smaller face, and a mouth that would fit on a jack-o'-lantern. The mouth widened even more when he smiled.

"Mrs. Taney? Could I have a few minutes to talk to you? My name is Hugh Lasater, from the Drug Enforcement Administration." He handed her his identification and she started to open the door; he held it to the few inches the chain allowed.

"Ma'am, if you don't mind. You study the I.D. and the picture, compare it to my man, and then if it seems okay, you open the door." He had a pained expression as he said this.

She did as he directed, then admitted him, thinking he must be looking for an informant or something. She thought of the half dozen vacant-eyed students in her classes; the thought was swiftly followed by relief that it no longer concerned her.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Lasater?" She motioned to a chair in a halfhearted way, hoping he would not accept the quasi-invitation.

"No one's here with you?"

She shook her head.

"Good." He took off his coat and hat and put them down on the sofa, then sank down into the chair she had indicated. "You almost ready to go?"

She started, but then, glancing about the apartment, decided anyone with an eye could tell she was going somewhere. "Yes. Next week I'm going on a trip."

"I know. Oregon. Salmon Key. The Donleavy house on Little Salmon Creek."

This time when she reacted with surprise, the chill was like a lump of ice deep within her. "What do you want, Mr. Lasater?"

"How'd you learn that trick?" he asked with genuine curiosity. "You never had any intelligence training."

“I don't know what you're talking about. If you'll just state your business. As you can see, I'm quite busy.”

“It's a dandy thing to know. You just step back a little and watch from safety, in a manner of speaking. Useful. Damned offputting to anyone not familiar with it. And you're damned good at it.”

She waited. He knew, she thought, that inside she was frozen: her way of handling anger, fear, indignation? Later she would analyze the different emotions. And Hugh Lasater, she realized, was also back a little, watching, calculating, appraising her all the way.

“Okay, I'll play it straight,” he said then. “No games, no appeal to loyalty, or your sense of justice, or anything else. We, my department and I, request your help in a delicate matter. We want you to get fingerprints from a suspect for us.”

She laughed in relief. “You aren't serious.”

“Oh yes, deadly serious. The Donleavy house is just a hop away from another place that sits on the next cliff overlooking the ocean. And in that other house is a man we're after quite seriously. But we have to make certain. We can't tip him that we're on to him. We need someone so innocent, so unlikely that he'll never give her a second thought. You pass him a picture to look at; he gives it back and you put it away carefully in an envelope we provide. Finis. That's all we want. If he's our man, we put a tail on him and let him lead us to others even more important and nab them all. They're smuggling in two-thirds of all the coke and hash and opium being used in the States today.”

He knew he had scored because her face became so expressionless that it might have been carved from wax. It was the color of something that had died a long time ago.

“That's contemptible,” she said in a low voice.

“I'm sorry,” he replied. “I truly am. But we are quite desperate.”

She shook her head. “Please go,” she said in a low voice. In a flash the lump of ice had spread; her frozen body was a thing apart. She had learned to do this in analysis, to step out of the picture to observe herself doing crazy things — groping for pills in an alcoholic fog, driving eighty miles an hour after an evening in a bar ... It was a good trick, he was right. It had allowed her to survive then; it would get her through the next few minutes until he left.

“Mrs. Taney, your kid wasn't the only one, and every day there are more statistics to add to the mess. And they'll keep on being added day after day. Help us put a stop to it.”

“You have enough agents. You don't need to drag in someone from outside.”

“I told you, it has to be someone totally innocent, someone there with a reason beyond doubting. You'll get your pictures and your story, that's legitimate enough. The contracts are good. No one will ever know you helped us.” He stood up and

went to his overcoat and took a large insulated envelope from the inside pocket. “Mrs. Taney, we live in the best of times and the worst of times. We want to squash that ring of genteel importers. People like that are making these the worst of times. It's a dirty business; okay, I grant you that. But Mike's death was dirtier. Twelve years old, overdosed. That's pretty damned filthy.” He put the envelope down on the end table by the sofa. “Let them make the first move. Don't try to force yourself on them in any way. There's Saul Werther, about sixty-two or three, cultured, kindly, probably lonesome as hell by now. And a kid he has with him, cook, driver, handyman, bodyguard, who knows? Twenty-one at the most, Chicano. They'll want to know who you are and why you're there. No secret about you, the magazine story, the eagles, it's all legitimate as hell. They'll buy it. You like music, so does Werther. You'll get the chance. Just wait for it and then take advantage of it. Don't make a big deal of not messing up his prints if he handles a picture, a glass, whatever. Don't handle it unnecessarily either. There's some wrapping in the envelope; put it around the object loosely first, then pop it in the envelope and put it away. We'll be in touch.”

Now he put the coat on. At the door he looked back at her. “You'll do fine, Lyle. You really will. And maybe you'll be able to accept that you're getting back at them just a little bit. It might even help.”

Brilliant green moss covered the tree trunks; ferns grew in every cranny, on the lower dead limbs, on the moss, every inch of space between the trees. Nowhere was any ground visible, or any rock; all was hidden by the mosses and ferns. Evergreen bushes made impenetrable thickets in spots where the trees had been cut in the past, or a fire had raged. Logging had stopped years ago and now the trees were marching again, overtaking the shrubs, defeating them, reclaiming the steep hills. Raindrops glistened on every surface, shimmered on the tips of the emerald fronds; the air was blurred with mist. The rain made no sound, was absorbed by the mosses, transferred to the ground below efficiently, silently.

Lyle sat on a log and listened to the silence of the woods on this particular hill. The silences varied, she had learned; almost always the surf made the background noise, but here it was inaudible. This was like a holding-your-breath silence, she decided. No wind moved the trees, nothing stirred in the undergrowth, no birds called or flew. It was impossible to tell if the rain had stopped; often it continued under the trees long after the skies had cleared. She got up presently and climbed for another half-hour to the top of the hill. It had been a steep climb, but a protected one; here on the crest the wind hit her. Sea wind, salt wind, fresh yet filled with strange odors. The rain had stopped. She braced herself against the trunk of a tree twisted out of shape with sparse growth clinging to the tip ends of its branches. She was wearing a dark green poncho, rain pants of the same color over her woolen slacks, high boots, a woolen knit hat pulled low on her forehead and covered with the poncho hood. A pair of binoculars was clipped to her belt under the poncho. She took them out and began to study the surrounding trees, the other hilltops that now were visible, the

rocks of a ledge with a drop of undetermined distance, because the gorge, or whatever it was, was bathed in mist. She did not spot the nest.

She turned the glasses toward the ocean and for a long time looked seaward. A new storm was building. A boat so distant that it remained a smudge, even with the full magnification, was stuck to the horizon. She hoped that if it was a fishing boat, it made port before the storm hit. There had been two storms so far in the sixteen days she had been in Oregon. It still thrilled and frightened her to think of the power, the uncontrollable rage of the sea under storm winds. It would terrify her to be out there during such a storm. As she watched, the sea and sky became one and swallowed the boat. She knew the front would be racing toward shore, and she knew she would be caught if she returned to her house the way she had come. She stepped back under the trees and mentally studied the map of this day's search. She could go back along the western slope of the hill, skirt the gorge (it was a gorge cut by a tiny fierce stream), follow it until it met Little Salmon Creek, which would lead her home. It was rough, but no rougher than any other trail in these jagged hills that went up and down as if they had been designed by a first-grader.

The wind blew harder, its cutting edge sharp and cold. Her face had been chapped ever since day one here, and she knew today would not improve matters. She started down the rugged hillside heading toward the creek gorge. The elevation of this peak was one thousand feet; her cabin was one hundred feet above sea level. She began to slide on wet mosses, and finally stopped when she reached out to grasp a tree trunk. Going down would be faster than getting up had been, she thought grimly, clutching the tree until she got her breath back. The little creek plunged over a ledge to a pool fifteen or twenty feet below; she had to detour to find a place to get down the same distance. "A person could get killed," she muttered, inching down on her buttocks, digging in her heels as hard as she could, sliding a foot or so at a time.

The trees were fir, pine, an occasional alder, an even rarer oak, and at the margins of the woods huckleberries, blueberries, blackberries, Oregon grapes, raspberries, salmon berries, elderberries ... She could no longer remember the long list of wild plants. They grew so luxuriantly that they appeared to be growing on top of and out of each other, ten feet high, twenty feet. She never had seen such a profusion of vines.

Down, down, slipping, sliding, lowering herself from tree trunk to tree trunk, clinging to moss-covered rocks, feeling for a toehold below, sometimes walking gingerly on the scree at the edge of the creek when the berry bushes were impenetrable. Always downward. At last she reached a flat spot, and stopped to rest. She had come down almost all the way. She no longer had any chance of beating the storm; she would be caught and drenched. Now all she hoped was that she could be off the steep hill before it struck with full force. She looked seaward; there were only trees that were being erased by mist and clouds leaving suggestive shadows. Then she gasped. There was the nest!

As Mal Levinson had said, it was hard to hide an eagle's nest. It was some distance from her, down a ravine, up the other side, a quarter of a mile or perhaps a little

more. The roiling mist was already blurring its outlines. Impossible to judge its size, but big. It had to be old, used year after year, added to each new season. Eight feet across? She knew any figures from this distance were meaningless, but she could not stop the calculations. Half as deep as it was wide, four by eight then. It crowned a dead pine tree. A gust of wind hit her, lifted her hood, and now she realized that for some time she had been hearing the roar of the surf. She got up and started to make the final descent. In a few moments she came to the place where the little creek joined the larger one, and together they crashed over a rocky outcropping. Now she knew exactly where she was. She stayed as close to the bank of the creek as she could, searching for a place where she could cross. Farther down, near her cabin, she knew it was possible, but difficult because in its final run to the sea the creek was cutting a deep channel through the cliffs.

How lucky, she was thinking, to find the nest this close to her own place. The two creeks came together at the two-hundred-foot altitude, child's play after scrambling up and down one-thousand-foot peaks. Less than a mile from the cabin; it would be nothing to go back and forth, pack in her gear ... She stopped suddenly and now felt a chill that the wind had not been able to induce in her. There was the other house, Werther's house. The nest was almost in his back yard.

The boy appeared, coming from the garage carrying a grocery bag. He waved and, after a brief hesitation, she waved back, then continued to follow the creek down to the bridge where tons of boulders and rocks of all sizes had been dumped to stabilize the banks for the bridge supports.

The rain finally started as she approached the bridge, and she made her way down the boulders with the rain blinding and savaging her all the way. The creek was no more than a foot deep here, but very swift, white water all the way to the beach. Normally she would have picked her way across it on the exposed rocks, but this time she plunged in, trusting her boots to be as waterproof as the manufacturer claimed.

She had forgotten, she kept thinking in disbelief. She had forgotten about Werther and his young driver/cook/bodyguard. At first it had been all she had thought about, but then, with day after day spent in the wet woods, climbing, slipping, sliding, searching, it was as if she had developed amnesia and for a week or longer she had not thought of them at all. It was the same feeling she had had only a few days ago, she realized, when she had come upon a bottle of sleeping pills and had looked at it without recognition. Then, as now, it had taken an effort to remember.

She made her way up her side of the boulders; five hundred feet away was her cabin dwarfed by rhododendrons. Weakly she dragged herself toward it, turning once to glance briefly at the other house, knowing it was not visible from here, but looking anyway. The boy had walked to the edge of the creek, was watching her; he waved again, and then ran through the rain back toward his own house, disappearing among the trees and bushes that screened it.

Spying on her? That openly? Maybe he had been afraid she would fall down in the

shallow treacherous stream. Maybe he thought she had fallen many times already; she considered how she looked: muddy, bedraggled, dripping, red-faced from windburn and cold. She looked like a nut, she thought, a real nut.

She found the key under the planter box and let herself in. The cabin was cold and smelled of sea air and salt and decay. Before she undressed, she made up the fire in the wood stove and put water on to boil for coffee. She wished she had not seen the boy, that he had not spoiled this moment of triumph, that the nest was not in Werther's back yard almost, that Lasater had never ... She stopped herself. She wished for golden wings.

“Don't waste perfectly good wishes on mundane things,” her father had said to her once when she had still been young enough to sit on his lap.

She was smiling slightly then as she pulled off her boots; her feet were wet and cold. Ah well, she had expected that, she thought sourly. She made the coffee, then showered, and examined new bruises acquired that day. She had not lost weight, she thought, surveying herself, but she was shifting it around a lot. Her waist was slimming down, while, she felt certain, her legs were growing at an alarming rate. She would have legs like a sumo wrestler after a few more weeks of uphill, downhill work. Or like a mountain goat. She pulled on her warmest robe and rubbed her hair briskly, then started to make her dinner.

She sniffed leftover soup, shrugged, and put it on to heat, scraped mold off a piece of cheese, toasted stale bread, quartered an apple, and sat down without another thought of food. As she ate, she studied her topographic map, then drew in a circle around the spot where she knew the nest was. As she had suspected, it was less than half a mile from Werther's house, but not visible from it because of the way the land went up and down. There was a steep hill, then a ravine, then a steeper hill, and it was the flanks of the second hill that the eagle had chosen for a building site.

She started in surprise when there was a knock on the door. No one had knocked on that door since her arrival. She looked down at herself, then shrugged. She was in a heavy flannel robe and fleece-lined moccasins. Her hair was still wet from the shower, and out every which way from her toweling it. Her wet and muddy clothes were steaming on chairs drawn close to the stove. Everywhere there were books, maps, notebooks; her typewriter was on an end table, plugged into an extension cord that snaked across the room. Mail was stacked on another end table; it had been stacked, now it was in an untidy heap, with a letter or two on the floor where they had fallen when the stack had leaned too far.

“What the hell,” she muttered, stepping over the extension cord to open the door.

It was the boy from Werther's house. He grinned at her. He was a good-looking kid, she thought absently, trying to block his view of the room. It was no good, though, he was tall enough to see over her head. His grin deepened. He had black hair with a slight wave, deep brown eyes, beautiful young skin. A heart throb, she thought, remembering the phrase from her school years.

“I caught a lot of crabs today,” he said, and she saw the package he was carrying. “Mr. Werther thought you might like some.” He held out the package.

She knew he had seen the remains of her dinner, her clothes, everything. No point in pretending now. She held the door open and stepped back. “Would you like to come in? Have a cup of coffee?”

“Thanks,” he said, shaking his head. “I have to go back and make our dinner now.”

She took the package. “Thank you very much. I appreciate this.”

He nodded and left in the rain. He had come through the creek, she realized, the same way she had come. Actually it was quicker than getting a car down the steep driveway, onto the road, up her equally steep driveway. Over a mile by road, less than half a mile by foot. She closed the door and took the package to the sink. The crabs, two of them, had been steamed and were still warm. Her mouth was watering suddenly, although she had eaten what she thought was enough at the time. She melted butter, then slowly ate again, savoring each bite of the succulent crab meat. Werther, or the boy, had cracked the legs just enough; she was able to get out every scrap. When she finished, she sat back sighing with contentment. She was exhausted, her room was a sty, but she had found the nest. It had been a good day.

And Lasater? She scowled, gathered up her garbage, and cleared it away. Damn Lasater.

For the next three days she studied the area of the nest minutely. There was no good vantage point actually for her to stake out as her own. The pine spur was at the end of a ravine that was filled with trees and bushes. Nowhere could she see through the dense greenery for a clear view of the nest. She had to climb one hill after another, circling the ravine, keeping the nest in sight, looking for a likely place to put her lean-to, to set up her tripod, to wait. She finally found a site, about four feet higher than the nest, on a hillside about one hundred feet from it, with a deep chasm between her and the nest. She unslung her backpack and took out the tarpaulin and nylon cords, all dark green, and erected the lean-to, fastening it securely to trees at all four corners. It would have to do, she decided, even though it stood out like a beer can in a mountain brook. She had learned, in photographing hawks, that most birds would accept a lean-to, or wooden blind even, if it was in place before they took up residence. During the next week or so the lean-to would weather, moss would cover it, ferns grow along the ropes, a tree or two sprout to hide the flap ... She took a step back to survey her work, and nodded. Fine. It was fine and it would keep her dry, she decided, and then the rain started again.

Every three or four days a new front blew in from the Pacific bringing twenty-foot waves, thirty-foot waves, or even higher, crashing into the cliffs, tearing out great chunks of beach, battling savagely with the pillars, needles, stacks of rock that stood in the water as if the land were trying to sneak out to sea. In the thick rain forests the jagged hills broke up the wind; the trees broke up the rain, cushioned its impact, so

that by the time it reached the mosses, it was almost gentle. The mosses glowed and bulged with the bounty. The greens intensified. It was like being in an underwater garden. Lyle made her way down the hillside with the cold rain in her face, and she hardly felt it. The blind was ready; she was ready; now it would be a waiting game. Every day she would photograph the nest, and compare the pictures each night. If one new feather was added she would know. The eagles could no more conceal their presence than they could conceal their nest.

When she reached her side of the bridge again, she crossed the road and went out to the edge of the bluff that overlooked the creek and the beach. The roar of surf was deafening; there was no beach to be seen. This storm had blown in at high tide and waves thundered against the cliffs. The bridge was seventy-five feet above the beach, but spray shot up and was blown across it again and again as the waves exploded below. Little Salmon Creek dropped seventy-five feet in its last mile to the beach, with most of the drop made in a waterfall below the bridge; now Little Salmon Creek was being driven backward and was rising. Lyle stood transfixed, watching the spectacular storm, until the light failed, and now the sounds of crashing waves, of driftwood logs twenty feet long being hurled into bridge pilings, of wind howling through the trees all became frightening and she turned and hurried toward her cabin. She caught a motion from the cliff on the other side of the bridge and she could make out the figure of a watcher there. He was as bundled up as she was, and the light was too feeble by then to be able to tell if it was the boy, or Werther.

The phone was ringing when she got inside and pushed the door closed against the wind that rushed through with her. Papers stirred with the passage, then settled again. She had to extract the telephone from under a pile of her sweaters she had brought out to air because things left in the bedroom tended to smell musty. The wood stove and a small electric heater in her darkroom were the only heat in the cabin.

“Yes,” she said, certain it was a wrong number.

“Mrs. Taney, this is Saul Werther. I wonder if I can talk you into having dinner with me this evening. I'd be most happy if you will accept. Carmen will be glad to pick you up in an hour and take you home again later.”

She felt a rush of fear that drained her. *Please*, she prayed silently, *not again. Don't start again.* She closed her eyes hard.

“Mrs. Taney, forgive me. We haven't really met, I'm your neighbor across the brook,” he said, as if reminding her he was still on the line. “We watched the storm together.”

“Yes, of course, I'd ... Thank you. I'll be ready in an hour.”

For several minutes she stood with her hand on the phone.

It had happened again, the first time in nearly four years. It had been Werther on the phone, but she had heard Mr. Hendrickson's voice. “Mrs. Taney, I'm afraid there's been an accident...” And she had known. It had been as if she had known even before the telephone rang that evening; she had been waiting for confirmation,

nothing more. Fear, grief, shock, guilt: she had been waiting for a cause, for a reason for the terrible emotions that had gripped her, that had been amorphously present for an hour and finally settled out only with the phone call. No one had believed her, not Gregory, not the psychiatrist, and she would have been willing to disbelieve, yearned to be able to disbelieve, but could not, because now and then, always with a meaningless call, that moment had swept over her again. She had come to recognize the rush of emotions that left her feeling hollowed out, as the event was repeated during the next year and a half after Mike's death. And then it had stopped, until now. "Mrs. Taney, I'm afraid there's been an accident. Your son..."

She began to shiver, and was able to move again. She had to get out of her wet clothes, build up the fire, shower ... This was Lasater's doing. He had made the connection in her mind between Werther, drugs, Mike's death. He had reached inside her head with his words and revived the grief and guilt she had thought was banished. Clever Mr. Lasater, she thought grimly. He had known she would react, not precisely how, that was expecting too much even of him. He had known Werther would make the opening move. If Werther was involved with drug smuggling, she wanted him dead, just as dead as her child was, and she would do all she could to make him dead. Even as she thought it, she knew Lasater had counted on this too.

Hugh Lasater drove through the town of Salmon Key late that afternoon before the storm hit. He and a companion, Milton Follett, had been driving since early morning, up from San Francisco in a comfortable, spacious motor home.

"It's the hills that slowed us down," Hugh Lasater said. "The freeway was great, and then we hit the coastal range. Should have been there by now."

Milton Follett was slouched down low in his seat; he did not glance at the town as they went through. "Could have called," he grumbled, as he had done several times in the past hour or so. He was in his mid-thirties, a blond former linebacker whose muscles were turning to flab.

"Thought of that," Hugh Lasater said. "Decided against it. Little place like this, who knows how the lines are connected, who might be listening? Anyway I might have to apply a little pressure."

"I think it's a bust, she's stringing you along."

"I think you're right. That's the reason I might have to apply a little pressure."

He drove slowly, collecting information: Standard Gas, attached gift shop; Salmon Key Restaurant and Post Office, a frame building painted red; Reichert's Groceries, having a canned food sale — corn 3/\$1.00, tomatoes, beans, peas 4/\$1.00; Thom's Motel, closed; a sign for a lapidary shop; farmers' market and fish stand, closed ... Tourist town, closed for the season. There were a few fishing boats docked behind the farmers' market, and space at the dock for four times as many, unused for a long time apparently. A dying fishing town, surviving now with tourist trade a few months out of the year. Lasater had seen numberless towns like this one; he touched the

accelerator and left the dismal place behind and started up another hill.

“Sure could have used a road engineer and a few loads of dynamite,” he said cheerfully, shifting down for the second time on the steep incline. The hill rose five hundred feet above sea level, reached a crest, and plunged down the other side. He did not shift into higher gear as he went down. The wind was starting to shake the monster, forcing him to hold the steering wheel around at an unnatural position for a straight road. The wind let up, and the vehicle rebounded. He slowed down more.

“Another mile's all,” he said. “We'll be in camp in time to see the storm hit.”

“Terrific,” Milton growled.

Lasater made the turn off the highway onto a narrow gravel road that was steeper than anything he had driven that day. The trees had been shaped here by the nearly constant wind and sea spray; there were stunted pines and dense thickets of low, contorted spruces. The motor home was vibrating with the roar of the ocean and the explosive crashes of waves on cliffs. There were other people already in the state park; a couple of campers, a van, and even a tent. As they pulled into the camping area a sleek silver home-on-wheels pulled out. Lasater waved to the driver as they passed in the parking turn-around; he took the newly vacated spot.

Milton refused a walk with him, and he went alone to the ridge overlooking The Lagoon. That was its name, said so on the map, and there it was, a nearly perfect circle a mile across surrounded by cliffs with a narrow stretch of beach that gave way to a basalt terrace, which, at low tide, would be covered with tide pools. The lagoon was protected from the sea by a series of massive basalt rocks, like a coral reef barrier. Although they ranged from twenty to forty feet above water, the ocean was pouring over them now; the lagoon was flooded and was rising on the cliffs. Waves crashing into the barrier megaliths sent spray a hundred feet into the air.

He looked at the lagoon, then beyond it to the next hill. Over that one, down the other side was Werther's drive, then the bridge over Little Salmon Creek, and then her drive. Here we all are, he thought, hunching down in his coat as the wind intensity grew. Time to go to work, honey, he thought at Lyle Taney. You've had a nice vacation, now's time to knuckle down, make a buck, earn your keep.

He had no doubt that Lyle Taney would do as he ordered, eventually. She was at a time of life when she would be feeling insecure, he knew. She had chucked her job, and if he threatened to pull the rug from under her financially, she would stand on her head in any corner he pointed to. He knew how important security was to a woman like Lyle Taney. Even when she had had a reason to take a leave of absence, she had held on grimly, afraid not to hold on because she had no tenure, no guarantees about tomorrow. He had imagined her going over the figures again and again, planning to the day when her savings would be gone, if she had to start using that stash, trying to estimate royalties to the penny, stretching that money into infinity. He understood women like Taney, approaching middle age, alone, supporting themselves all the way. It was fortunate that she was nearing middle age. The kid was too young to interest her, and Werther too old; no sexual intrigues to mess up the scenario. He

liked to keep things neat and simple. Money, security, revenge, those were things that were manipulable. They were real things, not abstracts, not like loyalty or faith. He did not believe a woman could be manipulated through appeals to loyalty or faith. They were incapable of making moral or ethical decisions. They did not believe in abstracts. Maternal devotion, security, money, revenge, that was what they understood, and this time it had worked out in such a way that those were the very things he could dangle before her, or threaten. Oh, she would do the job for him. He knew she would. He began to hum and stopped in surprise when he realized it was a tune from his boyhood, back in the forties. He grinned. Who would have thought a song would hang out in a mind all those years to pop out at just the right moment? He sang it to himself on his way back to the motor home: "They're either too young or too old/They're either too gray or too grassy green..."

Werther's house was a surprise to Lyle. It was almost as messy as her own, and with the same kind of disorder: papers, books, notebooks, a typewriter. His was on a stand on wheels, not an end table, but that was a minor detail. Carmen was almost laughing at her reaction.

"I told Mr. Werther that I thought you would be very *simpatico*," he said, taking her coat.

Then Werther came from another room, shook her hand warmly, and led her to the fireplace.

"It's for a book I've wanted to do for a long time," he said, indicating the jumble of research materials. "A history of a single idea from the first time it's mentioned in literature, down to its present-day use, if any. Not just one idea, but half a dozen, a dozen. I'm afraid I keep expanding the original concept as I come across new and intriguing lines of inquiry." His face twisted in a wry expression. "I'd like to get rid of some of this stuff, but there's nowhere to start. I need it all."

He was five feet eight or nine, and stocky; not fat or even plump, but well-muscled and heavy-boned. He gave the impression of strength. His hair was gray, a bit too long, as if he usually forgot to have it cut, not as if he had intended it to be modish. His eyes were dark blue, so dark that at first glance she had thought them black. He had led her to a chair by the fireplace; there was an end table by it with a pile of books. He lifted the stack, looked about helplessly, then put it on the floor by the side of the table. *A History of Technology*, *Plato's Republic*, a volume of *Plato's dialogues*, *Herodotus*, *Kepler ...* There was a mountainous stack of the *New York Times*.

Many of the books in the room were opened, some with rocks holding the pages down; others had strips of paper for bookmarks.

"My problem is that I'm not a writer," Werther said. "It's impossible to organize so much material. One wants to include it all. But you..." He rummaged through a pile of books near his own chair and brought out her book on hawks. "What a delightful

book this is! I enjoyed it tremendously.”

“I'm not a writer either,” she said quickly. “I teach — taught — history.”

“That's what the jacket says. Ancient history. But you used the past tense.”

Although there was no inflection, no question mark following the statement, she found herself answering as if he had asked. She told him about the magazine, and the book contract, the nest.

“And you simply quit when you couldn't get time off to do the next book. Doing the book on eagles was more important to you than remaining in your own field. I wonder that more historians don't lose faith.”

She started to deny that she had lost faith in history, but the words stalled; he had voiced what she had not wanted to know. She nodded. “And you, Mr. Werther, what is your field? History also?”

“No. That's why my research is so pleasurable. I'm discovering the past. That's what makes your hawk book such a joy. It sings with discovery. It's buoyant because you were finding out things that gave you pleasure; you in turn invested that pleasure in your words and thoughts and shared it with your readers.”

She could feel her cheeks burn. Werther laughed gently. “What capricious creatures we are. We are embarrassed by criticism, and no less embarrassed by praise. And you have found your eagle's nest after all those days of searching. Congratulations. At first, when you moved in next door, I thought you were a spy. But what a curious spy, spending every day getting drenched in a rain forest!”

“And I thought you were a smuggler,” she said, laughing with him, but also watching, suddenly wary again.

“The lagoon would make a perfect spot for landing contraband, wouldn't it? Ah, Carmen, that looks delightful!”

Carmen carried two small trays; he put one down at Lyle's elbow on the end table, and the other one within Werther's reach, perched atop a stack of books. There was wheat-colored wine, a small bowl of pink Pacific shrimp, a dip, cheese, crackers...

“I've never tasted such good shrimp as these,” Werther said, spearing one of the tidbits. “I could live on the seafood here.”

“Me too,” Lyle agreed. The wine was a very dry sherry, so good it made her want to close her eyes and savor it. The fire burned quietly, and Carmen made cooking noises that were obscured by a door. Werther had become silent now, enjoying the food; outside, the wind howled and shook the trees, rattled rhododendrons against the windows, whistled in the chimney. It was distant, no longer menacing; through it all, behind it, now and then overwhelming the other sounds, was the constant roar of the surf. She thought of the pair of eagles: where were they now? Were they starting to feel twitches that eventually would draw them back to the nest?

Presently Werther sighed. “Each of us may well be exactly what the other thought at

first, but that's really secondary, isn't it? How did you, a history professor, become involved with hawks?"

She brought herself back to the room, back to the problem Lasater had dumped in her lap. Slowly she said, "Five years ago my son, he was twelve, took something one of the boys in his class had bought from a drug dealer. There were twenty boys involved; three of them died, several of them suffered serious brain damage. Mike died."

Her voice had gone very flat in the manner of one reading a passage in a foreign language without comprehension. She watched him as she talked. She could talk about it now; that was what she had accomplished under Dr. Himbert. She had learned how to divide herself into pieces, and let one of the pieces talk about it, about anything at all, while the rest of her stayed far away hidden in impenetrable ice.

Werther was shocked, she thought, then angry. One of his hands made a movement toward her, as if to touch her — to silence her? or share her grief? She could not tell.

"And you turned to the world of hawks where there is no good or evil, only necessity."

She felt bathed in the warmth of his words suddenly, as if his compassion were a physical, material substance that he had wrapped around her securely. He knew, she thought. He understood. That was exactly what she had looked for, had needed desperately, something beyond good and evil. Abruptly she looked away from his penetrating and too understanding gaze. She wanted to tell him everything, she realized in wonder, and she could tell him everything. He would not condemn her. Quickly then she continued her story, trying to keep her voice indifferent.

"I found I couldn't stay in our apartment over weekends and holidays after that. My husband and I had little reason to stay together and he left, went to California, where he's living now. I began to tramp through the woods, up and down the Appalachian Trail, things like that. One day I got a photograph of a hawk in flight, not the one on the cover, not that nice, but it made me want to get more. Over the next couple of years I spent all my spare time pursuing hawks. And I began to write the book."

Werther was nodding. "Therapy. And what good therapy it was for you. No doctor could have prescribed it. You are cured."

Again it was not exactly a question; it demanded no answer. And again she felt inclined to respond as if it had been. "I'm not sure," she said. "I had a breakdown, as you seem to have guessed. I hope I'm cured."

"You're cured," he said again. He got up and went to a sideboard where Carmen had left the decanter of wine. He refilled both their glasses, then said, "If you'll excuse me a moment, I'll see how dinner's coming along. Carmen's a good cook, but sometimes he dawdles."

She studied the living room; it was large, with a dining area, and beyond that a door to the kitchen. The west wall was heavily draped, but in daylight with the drapes open, it would overlook the sea, as her own living room did. Probably there was a

deck; there was an outside door on that wall. One other door was closed, to the bedroom area, she guessed. The plan was very like the plan of her cabin, but the scale was bigger. Both were constructed of redwood, paneled inside, and had broad plank floors with scatter rugs. She began to look through the piles of magazines on tables: science magazines, both general and specialized. Molecular biology, psychology, physics ... History journals — some probably had papers of hers. There was no clue here, or so many clues that they made no sense. It would be easy to pick up a digest magazine or two, slip them in her purse, put them in the envelope and be done with it.

But he wasn't a smuggler, she thought clearly. Lasater had lied. She picked up a geology book dog-eared at a chapter about the coast range.

“Are you interested in geology?” Werther asked, coming up behind her.

“I don't know a thing about it,” she admitted, replacing the book.

“According to the most recent theory, still accepted it's so recent, there are great tectonic plates underlying the rock masses on earth. These plates are in motion created by the thermal energy of the deeper layers. Here along the coast, they say, two plates come together, one moving in from the sea, the other moving northward. The one coming in from the west hits the other one and dives under it, and the lighter materials are scraped off and jumbled together to make the coast range. That accounts for the composition, they say. Andesite, basalt, garnetite, sandstone, and so on. Have you had a chance to do any beach combing yet?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. I'll have more time now that I've located the nest.”

“Good. Let me take you to some of my favorite places. South of here. You have to be careful because some of those smaller beaches are cut off at high tide, and the cliffs are rather forbidding.”

Carmen appeared then. “I thought you were going to sit down so I can serve the soup.”

Carmen dined with them and his cooking was superb. When she complimented him, he said, “No, this is plain everyday family fare. I didn't know we were having company. Next time I'll know in advance. Just wait.”

There was a clear broth with slices of water chestnut and bits of clam and scallion; a baked salmon stuffed with crab; crisp snow peas and tiny mushrooms, salad with a dressing that suggested olive oil and lime juice and garlic, but so faintly that she could not have said for certain that any or all of those ingredients had been used.

“And take Anaxagoras,” Werther said sometime during that dinner, “nearly five hundred years before Christ! And he had formulated the scientific method, maybe not as precisely as Bacon was to do two thousand years later, and without the same dissemination, but there it was. He wrote that the sun was a vast mass of incandescent metal, that moonlight was reflected sunlight, that heavenly bodies were

made incandescent by their rotational friction. He explained, in scientific terms, meteors, eclipses, rainbows...”

The ancient names rolled off his tongue freely, names, dates, places, ideas.

“Empedocles identified the four elements: air, earth, fire, and water, and even today we speak of a fiery temper, an airy disposition, blowing hot and cold, an earthy woman, the raging elements, battling the elements, elemental spirits... An idea, twenty-five hundred years old, and it's still in the language, in our heads, in our genes maybe.”

Before dinner there had been the sherry, and with dinner there was a lovely Riesling, and then a sweet wine she did not know. She told herself that no one gets drunk on wine, especially along with excellent food, but, once again before the fire, she was having trouble following the conversation, and somewhere there was a soft guitar playing, and a savage wind blowing, and rain pounding the house rhythmically.

She realized she had been talking about herself, her lack of tenure and seeming inability to get tenure. “I'm not a hotshot scholar,” she said, thinking carefully of the words, trying to avoid any that might twist her up too much. She thought: hotshot scholar and knew she could never say it again. She knew also that if she repeated it to herself, she would start to giggle. The thought of breaking into giggles sobered her slightly.

“You're interested in what people thought,” she said almost primly, “but we teach great movements, invasions, wars, successions of reign, and it's all irrelevant. The students don't care; they need the credit. It doesn't make any difference today, none of it.”

“Why don't you do it right?”

“I'd have to go back to Go and start over, relearn everything. Unlearn everything. I've always been afraid. I don't even know what I'm afraid of.”

“So you bailed out at the first chance. But now I think Carmen had better take you home. You can hardly keep your eyes open. It's the fresh air and wind and climbing these steep hills, I suspect.”

She nodded. It was true, she was falling asleep. Suddenly she felt awkward, as if she had overstayed a visit. She glanced at her watch and was startled to find that it was eleven-thirty.

“Ready?” Carmen asked. He had her coat over his arm, had already put on a long poncho.

Werther went to the door with them. “Come back soon, my dear. It's been one of the nicest evenings I've had in a very long time.”

She mumbled something and hurried after Carmen to the car. The wind had died down now, but the rain was steady.

“He meant it,” Carmen said “It's been a good evening for both of us.”

“I enjoyed it too,” she said, staring ahead at the rain-blurred world. The drive was very curvy; it wound around trees, downward to the road, and only the last twenty-five feet or so straightened out. It would be very dangerous if the rain froze. Down this last straightaway, then onto the highway, across it and over the cliff to the rocks below. She shivered. Carmen had the car in low gear, and had no trouble at all in coming to a stop at the highway.

“Is he a doctor?” she asked. “Something he said tonight made me think he might be or has been a doctor.” She shook her head in annoyance; she could not remember why she thought that.

“I think he studied medicine a while back, maybe even practiced. I don't know.”

Of course, Carmen probably knew as little about his employer as she did. They had an easy relationship, and Carmen certainly had shown no fear or anxiety of any sort, but he was a hired man, hired to drive, to cook, to do odd jobs. They had arrived at her door.

“I'll come in and fix your fire,” Carmen said, in exactly the same tone he had used to indicate that dinner was ready. There was nothing obsequious or subservient in him.

He added wood to the fire, brought in a few pieces from the porch, and then left, and she went to bed immediately and dreamed.

She was in a class, listening to a lecture. The professor was writing on the blackboard as he talked, and she was taking notes. She could not quite make out his diagrams, and she hitched her chair closer to the front of the room, but the other students hissed angrily at her and the teacher turned around to scowl. She squinted trying to see, but it was no use. And now she no longer could hear his words, the hissing still buzzed around her ears. The professor came to her chair and picked up her notebook; he looked at her notes, nodded, and patted her on the back. When he touched her, she screamed and fled.

She was on a narrow beach with a black shiny cliff behind her. She knew the tide had turned because the hissing had become a roar. She hurried toward a trail and stopped because Lasater was standing at the end of the beach where the rocks led upward like steps. She looked the opposite way and stopped again. Werther was there, dressed in tails and striped trousers, with a pale gray top hat on. She heard a guitar and, looking up, she saw Carmen on a ledge playing. Help me, she cried to him. He smiled at her and continued to play. She raised her arms pleading for him to give her a hand, and an eagle swooped low and caught her wrists in its talons and lifted her just as the first wave crashed into the black cliff. The eagle carried her higher and higher until she no longer could see Werther or Lasater or the beach, the road, anything at all recognizable. Then the eagle let go and she fell.

Hugh Lasater waited until the Volvo came out of Werther's drive and turned north, heading for town, before he went up Lyle's driveway. There was a heavy fog that morning, but the air was still and not very cold. The front of her house had a view of

the ocean that must be magnificent when the weather was clear, and no doubt you had to be quick or you might miss it, he thought, gazing into the sea of fog, waiting for her to answer his knock.

Lyle was dressed to go out, boots, sweater, heavy slacks. She had cut her hair even shorter than it had been before. Now it was like a fuzzy cap on her head. He wondered if it was as soft as it looked. Silently she opened the door wider and moved aside for him to enter.

“How's it going?” he asked, surveying the room quickly, memorizing it in that one fast glance about. A real pig, he thought with a touch of satisfaction. It figured.

“Fine. I've found the nest.”

He laughed and pulled a chair out from the table and sat down. “Got any coffee?”

She poured a cup for him; there was another cup on the table still half-filled. She sat opposite him now, pushed a map out of the way, closed a notebook. Her camera gear was on the table, as if she had been checking it out before leaving with it.

“Pretty lousy weather for someone who has to get out and work in it every day,” he said. “Your face is really raw.”

She shrugged and began to put the lenses in pockets of the camera bag. Her hands were very steady. She could keep the tension way down where it couldn't interfere with appearances. Lasater admired that. But the tension was there, he could feel it; it was revealed in the way that she had not looked at him once since opening the door. She had looked at the coffee cup, at the pot, at her stuff on the table. Now she was concentrating on packing her camera bag.

“Met Werther yet?” he asked casually.

“Yes. Once.”

“And?”

“And nothing.”

“Tell me about him.” The coffee was surprisingly good. He got up and refilled his cup.

“You know more about him than I do.”

“Not what he's like; how he talks, what he likes, what he's like inside. You know what I mean.”

“He's educated, cultured, a scholar. He's gentle and kind.”

“What did you talk about?”

He caught a momentary expression that flitted rapidly across her face. Something there, but what? He saved it for later.

“Ancient Greece.”

“Lyle, loosen up, baby. I'm not going to bite or do anything nasty. Open up a little. Tell me something about the time you spent with him.”

She shook her head. “I'm not working for you, or with you. I'm here doing a job for a magazine, and for my publisher. That's all.”

“Uh-huh. It was the cover story, wasn't it? You don't buy it.” He sighed and finished the last of the coffee. “Don't blame you. After seeing that state park I don't blame you a bit. Have to be an idiot to try to smuggle anything into that cove. Who would have thought there'd be dopes camping out all winter. It's February for Christ sake!”

“You admit you lied to me?” She knew he was playing with her, keeping her off guard, but she could not suppress the note of incredulity that entered her voice. She knew he was a master at this game, also, and she was so naive that she didn't even know when the play started, or what the goals were.

“What did you talk about?”

She started again. There was more than a touch of confusion in her mind about what they had talked about for nearly five hours, and somehow she had revealed something to Hugh Lasater. Almost sullenly she said, “Philosophy, cuisines, the coast, geology. Nothing. It was nothing of any importance.” She finished packing her camera case and stood up. “I have to go out now. I'm sorry I can't help you.”

“Oh, you'll help,” he said almost absently, thinking about the changes in her voice, subtle as they were. Although she had learned to step back, her voice was revealing in the way it changed timbre, the quickness of her words. He had it now, the cue to watch for.

“Have you read your contracts for the article and the book?”

She became silent again, frozen, waiting.

“You should. If you didn't bring copies with you, I have some. I'll drop them off later today, or send someone else with them.”

“What are you threatening now?”

“You've got no job, kiddo, and the contracts have clauses in them that I doubt you'll be able to fulfill. I doubt seriously that you can get your story together within ninety days, starting nearly a month ago. And I doubt that you really meant you'd be willing to pay half your royalties to a ghostwriter. But you signed them, both of them. Honey, don't you ever read contracts before you sign them?”

“Get out of here,” she said. “Just get out and leave me alone.”

“People like you,” he said, shaking his head sadly. “You are so ignorant it's painful. You don't know what's going on in the world you live in. You feel safe and secure, but, honey, you can feel safe and secure only because people like me are doing their jobs.”

“Blackmailing others to do your jobs.”

“But sometimes that's part of the job,” he protested. “Look, Lyle, you must guess that this is an important piece of work, no matter what else you think. I mean, would anyone invest the kind of effort we've already put into it if it weren't important? We're counting on your loyalty—”

“Don't,” she snapped. “Loyalty to what, to whom? In the Middle Ages the nobility all across Europe was loyal to nobility. The guilds were loyal to guilds. Peasants to peasants. Where's the loyalty of a multinational corporation executive? or the Mafia? Loyal to what? What makes you think there's anything at all you can tell me that I'd believe?”

“I'm not telling you anything,” he said. “I know you won't believe me. Except this. He's a killer, Lyle, I didn't want to scare you off before....”

She pressed her hands over her ears. “So let the police arrest him and take him in for fingerprinting and questioning, the way they do other suspects.”

“Can't. He has something stashed away somewhere and we want it. We want him to lead us to it, if he's our man. First that. Is he our man? We can't go inside his house for prints. There are dozens of ways of booby-trapping a place to let you know if someone has entered. A hair in a door that falls when the door's opened. A bit of fluff that blows away if someone moves near it. An ash on a door handle. A spiderweb across a porch. He'd know. And he'd bolt, or kill himself. That's what we want to avoid. A dive off a cliff. A bullet through his brain. A lethal pill. We want him very badly. Alive, healthy, and in his own house where he keeps his stuff. We'll put a hundred agents on him, follow him ten years if it takes that long. If he's our man. And we expect you to furnish something that'll let us find out if he is our man. Soon, Lyle.” He paused, and when she did not respond he said, “So you like the old fart. So what? Even the devil has admirers. There's never been a monster who didn't have someone appear as a character witness. You see it every day, the neighbors describing a homicidal psychopath as a nice, quiet, charming man, so kind to the children. Balls! Your pal is a killer resting between jobs. Period. You're in no danger, unless you blow it all in front of him. But I'll tell you this, I wouldn't under-write life insurance on the kid with him.”

She regarded him bitterly, not speaking. He got up and went to the door. “I know, you're thinking why you? You didn't ask to get mixed up in something like this. Hell, I don't know why you. You were there. And you are mixed up in it. And I tell you this, Lyle baby. When it gets as big as this is, there's no middle ground. You're for us or against us. That simple. Be seeing you.”

Hugh Lasater had known Werther/Rechetnik would turn up at the most recent molecular biologists' conference at U.C.L.A. this past fall. He had counted on it the way he counted on Christmas or income tax day. And Werther had not let him down any more than Santa had done when he was a kid. Werther had been there and left in his white Volvo with the kid driving him as if he were a president or something. Since that day in November he had been under surveillance constantly. Twice they had tried ploys designed to get positive identification, and each time they had failed.

The kid paid the bills, did the shopping, drove the car. Werther wore gloves when he went out, and the house was booby-trapped. Turk had spotted a silk thread across the porch the first day Werther had left, and Turk had backed off exactly as he had been ordered.

The first time they tried to get his prints indirectly, it had been through the old dog of a routine telephone maintenance visit. The kid had refused the man admittance, said they didn't want the phone in the first place and didn't care if it was out. Period. No one insisted. The next time a young woman had run into Werther on the beach. She had been wearing a vinyl cape, pristine, spotless, ready to receive prints. Werther had caught her reflexively, steadied her, then had gone on his way, and Milton Follett had received the cape. Nothing. Smudges. Just as reflexive as his catching the girl had been, his other act of smearing the prints must have been also.

There were two men in the Lagoon state park at all times, one of them on high enough ground to keep the driveway under observation through daylight hours, and close enough at night to see a mouse scamper across the drive. Farther south there were two more men in the next state park. He was bottled up tight, and they still did not have positive identification.

They could have picked him up on suspicion of murder, staging the arrest, mug shots, prints, interrogation, everything, but Mr. Forbisher had explained patiently that Werther without his papers was simply another lunatic killer. He would surely suicide if cornered. They wanted it all in a neat package undamaged by rough handling. They wanted his papers. It irked him that no one would lay it all out, explain exactly what it was that Werther had. But Christ, he thought, it had to be big. Bigger than a new headache capsule. He suspected it was a cancer cure; the Nazis had used Werther's/Rechetaik's mother for cancer experiments, and he was getting his revenge. It had to be that, he sometimes thought, because what could be bigger than that? The pharmaceutical company that owned that secret would move right into the castle and be top of the heap for a long time to come. When he thought of the money they were already spending to get this thing, that they were willing to keep spending, it made his palms sweat. He did not really blame them for not telling him all of it; that was not how the game was played. All he needed to know, Mr. Forbisher had said primly, was that they wanted Werther, if he was actually Rechetnik; they wanted him intact with his papers. And Hugh Lasater had gone off looking for exactly the right person to put inside the house next door. Step one. He had come up with Lyle Taney.

She sat with her knees drawn to her chin, staring moodily at the nest. She did not believe Lasater and she knew it didn't matter if she did or not. She never would know the truth, and that didn't matter either. How many people ever learned truth in a single lifetime? she asked herself, still bitter and angry with Lasater, with herself for stepping into this affair.

She had read the contracts, and she had asked Bobby about the time, about other

things Lasater hadn't brought up yet, but no doubt would if he felt he had to. Formalities, Bobby had said, don't worry about them. Basically, he had said, it was the same contract as her first one, with a few changes because the work was not even started yet. And she had signed. She was dipping into her savings to pay for this trip, for the three months' rental on the house, for the car she had leased. It takes a month to six weeks to get money loose from the company, Mal had said. You know how bureaucracies are. And she did know.

They must have investigated her thoroughly. They knew her financial situation, the bills she had accumulated during those wasted, lost years; they knew about Mike; they knew she would be willing and even eager to leave her job. She remembered one thing Werther had said, about historians losing faith in what they thought. He was perceptive, Lasater was perceptive, only she had been blind. She put her forehead down on her knees and pressed hard. She wanted to weep. Furiously she lifted her head and stared at the nest again.

The sun had come out and the day was still and warm. Down on the beach there would be a breeze, but up here, sheltered by hills and trees, the air was calm and so clear she could see the bark on the pine spur that bore the eagles' nest.

"Mrs. Taney?" It was Carmen's voice in a hushed whisper.

She looked for him; he was standing near a tree as if ready to duck behind it quickly. "It's all right," she said. "The nest is still empty."

He climbed the rest of the way up and sat down by her, not all the way under the tarp. The sun lightened his hair, made it look russet. "You said last night that I could join you, see the nest. I hope you meant now, today. I brought you some coffee."

She thanked him as he took off a small pack and pulled a thermos from it. The coffee was steaming. He wore binoculars around his neck. She pointed and he aimed them at the nest and studied it for the next few minutes.

She had forgotten that he had asked if he could join her. She frowned at the coffee, trying to remember more of the conversation. Nothing more came.

"It's big, isn't it? How soon do you expect the eagles to come?"

"I'm not sure. They'll hang around, fixing up the nest, just fooling around for several weeks before they mate. Sometime in the next week or two, I should think."

He nodded. "Mr. Werther asked if you have to stay up here this afternoon. There's a place down the beach a few miles he'd like to show you. Beach-combing's great after a storm, and there's gold dust on the beach there."

She laughed. "I don't have to stay at all. I took a few pictures, I was just ... thinking." She started to check around her to make sure she had everything. "Have you been with him long?"

"Sometimes it seems a lifetime, then again like no time at all. Why do you ask?"

"Curious. You seem to understand him rather well."

“Yes. He's like a father. Someone you understand and accept and even love without questioning it or how you know so much about him. You know what I mean?”

“I think so. It's a package deal. You accept all or nothing.”

“He's very wise,” Carmen said, standing, reaching out to pull her to her feet. He was much stronger than his slender figure indicated. He looked at her and said, “I would trust him with my life, my honor, my future without any hesitation.” Then he turned and started down the hillside before her.

Just like Werther, she thought, following him down. He sidestepped questions just as Werther did, making it seem momentarily that he was answering, but giving nothing with any substance.

Lyle left her camera bag at Werther's house; they all got in the Volvo and Carmen drove down the coast a few miles. Here the road was nearly at sea level; water had covered it during the storm and there was still a mud slick on the surface. Carmen parked on a gravel turn-off, and they walked to the sandy beach. In some places the beach on this section of the coast was half a mile wide with pale soft sand, then again it was covered with smooth round black rocks, or a sliver of sand gave way to the bony skeleton of ancient mountains; here the beach was wide and level, and it was littered with storm refuse.

“We'll make our way toward those rocks,” Werther said, pointing south. The outline of the rocks was softened by mist, making it hard to tell how far away they were.

It took them five hours to get to the rocks and back. All along the way the storm debris invited investigation. There were strands of seaweed, eighteen feet long, as strong as ropes; there were anemones and starfish and crabs in tide pools, all of them colored pink or purple, blue, green, red ... there was a swath of black sand where Werther said there was probably gold also. It was often found among the heavy black sand; washed from the same deposits, it made its way downstream along with the dense black grains. They found no gold, but they might have, Lyle thought happily. She spied a blue ball and retrieved it. It was a Japanese fishing float, Werther said, examining it and handing it back. He talked about the fishing fleets, their lights like will-o'-the-wisps at sea. They had not used glass floats for thirty years, he said; the one she had found could have been floating all that time, finally making it to shore.

At one point Carmen produced sandwiches and a bottle of wine from his backpack, along with three plastic glasses. They sat on rocks, protected from a freshening breeze, and gazed at the blue waters of the Pacific. A flock of sea gulls drifted past and vanished around the outcropping of granite boulders.

“It's a beautiful world,” Werther said quietly. “Such a beautiful world.”

Carmen stood up abruptly and stalked away. He picked up something white and brought it back, flung it down at Werther's feet. It was half a Styrofoam cup.

“For how long?” he said in a hard furious voice. He picked up the wine bottle and glasses and replaced them in his backpack, then turned and left.

“You could bury it, but the next high tide will just uncover it again,” Werther said, nudging the Styrofoam with his foot. He picked it up and put it in his pocket. “Speaking of high tides, we have to start back. The tide's turning now, I think.”

They watched the sunset from the edge of the beach, near the car. The water covered their footprints, cleaning up the beach again of traces of human usage. It was dark by the time they got back to Werther's house.

“You must have dinner with us,” he insisted. “You're too tired to go cook. You'll settle for a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of milk. I feel guilty just thinking about dinner while you snack. Sit by the fire and nurse your images of the perfect day and presently we'll eat.”

Lyle looked at Carmen who nodded, smiling at her. It was he who knew what she would eat if she went home now. She thought of what he had said about understanding and accepting Werther, and she had the feeling that he understood and accepted her also, exactly as she was, nearing middle age, red-faced, frizzy hair going gray. None of that mattered a damn bit to him, not the way it mattered to Lasater whose eyes held scorn and contempt no matter how he tried to disguise it. She nodded, and Carmen reached out to take her coat; Werther said something about checking the wine supply, and needing more wood. She sank into the chair that she thought of as hers and sighed.

Perhaps she could say to Werther, please just give me a set of good fingerprints and let's be done with that. She could explain why she needed them, tell him about the hook Lasater had baited for her and her eagerness to snatch it. He would understand, even be sympathetic with her reasons. And if he was the man Lasater was after, he would forgive her. She snapped her eyes open as a shudder passed over her. Lasater was sure, and she was too. She felt only certainty that Werther lived under a fearsome shadow. She felt that he was a gentle man, whose gentleness arose from a terrible understanding of pain and fear; that underlying his open love of the ocean, the beach, the gulls, everything he had seen that day, there was a sadness with a depth she could not comprehend. She believed that his compassion, humanity, love, warmth, all observable qualities, overlay a core as rigid and unweathered and unassailable as the rocky skeletons of the mountains that endured over the eons while everything about them was worn away. He was a man whose convictions would lead him to action, had already led him to act, she thought, and admitted to herself that she believed he was wanted for something very important, not what Lasater said, because he was a congenital liar, but something that justified the manhunt that evidently was in progress. And she knew with the same certainty that she had been caught up in the middle of it, that already it was too late for her to exclude herself from whatever happened here on the coast. Unless she left immediately, she thought then.

“You're cold,” Carmen said, as if he had been standing behind her for some time. He was carrying wood. “These places really get cold as soon as the sun goes down.” He added a log to the fire, tossed in a handful of chips, and in a moment it was blazing. “You're in for a treat. He's going to make a famous old recipe for you.

Fish soup, I call it. He says bouillabaisse.” He stood up, dusting his hands together. “Be back instantly with wine. Do you want a blanket or something?”

She shook her head. The shiver had not been from any external chill. Presently, with Carmen on the floor before the fire, and her in her chair, they sipped the pale sherry in a companionable silence.

Carmen broke it: “Let's play a game. Pretend you're suddenly supreme dictator with unlimited power and wealth, what would you do?”

“Dictator of what?”

“Everything, the entire earth.”

“You mean God.”

“Okay. You're God. What now?”

She laughed. Freshmen games out of Philosophy 101. “Oh, I'd give everyone enough money to live on comfortably, and I'd put a whammy on all weapons, make them inoperative, and I'd cure the sick, heal the wounded. Little things like that.”

He shook his head. “Specifically. And seriously.” He looked up at her without a trace of a smile. “I mean if everyone had X dollars, then it would take XY dollars to buy limited things, and it would simply be a regression of the value of money, wouldn't it?”

“Okay, I'd redistribute the money and the goods so that everyone had an equal amount, and if that wasn't enough, I'd add to both until it was enough.”

“How long before a handful of people would have enormous amounts again, and many people would be hungry again simply because human nature seems to drive some people to power through wealth?”

She regarded him sourly. He was at an age when his idealism should make it seem quite simple to adjust the world equitably. She said, “God, with any sense at all, would wash her hands of the whole thing and go somewhere else.”

“But you, as God, would not be that sensible?”

“No, I'd try. I would think for a very long time about the real problems — too many people, for instance — and I'd try to find a way to help. But without any real hope of success.”

He nodded, and a curious intensity seemed to leave him. She had not realized how tense he had become until he now relaxed again.

Very deliberately she said, “Of course, solving the population problems doesn't mean it would be a peaceful world. Sometimes I think history was invented simply to record war, and before records, there were oral traditions. Even when the world was uninhabited except for a few fertile valleys, they fought over those valleys. There will always be people who want what others have, who have a need to control others, who have a need for power. Population control won't change that.”

“As God you could pick your population,” Carmen said carelessly. “Select for nonaggressiveness.”

“How? With what test? But, as God, I would know, wouldn't I?”

“There would be problems,” he said, looking into the fire now. “That's why I started this game saying dictator; you said God. Where does assertiveness end off and aggressiveness start? There are real problems.”

She was tiring of the adolescent game that he wanted to treat too seriously. She finished her wine and went to the sideboard to refill her glass. There was a mirror over the cupboard. She stared at herself in dismay. Her hair was impossible, like dark dandelion fluff, her cheeks and nose were peeling; her lips were chapped. She thought with envy of Carmen's beautiful skin. At twenty you seemed immune to wind damage. Sunburn on Saturday became a lovely glow by Sunday. She thought of Werther's skin, also untouched by the elements, too tough to change any more by now. Only she, in the middle, was ravaged-looking. She hoped dinner would be early; she had to go back to her house, take a long soaking bath, cream her skin, then get out her checkbook and savings passbook and do some figuring. She could do the book somewhere else, but if Bobby didn't take it, would anyone else? She remembered her own doubts about a second one so closely following the first, and she was afraid of the question.

The real fear, she thought, was economic. Whoever controlled your economic life controlled you. Overnight she could become another nonperson to be manipulated along with the countless other statistics. Her dread was very real and pervasive, and not leavened at all by the thought that Hugh Lasater understood how to use this fear because he also harbored it. That simply increased his power because he too was driven by uncontrollable forces.

Carmen joined her at the sideboard, met her gaze in the mirror. “You said you would heal the sick, cure the wounded. What if you had a perfect immunology method? Would you give it to the drug manufacturers? The government?”

Slowly she shook her head, dragged back from the real to the surreal. “I don't know. Perfect? What does that mean?”

“Immune to disease, radiation, cellular breakdown or aging...”

She was watching the two faces in the mirror, hers with its lines at her eyes, a deepening line down each side of her nose, the unmistakable signs of midlife accentuated by the windburn; his face was beautiful, like an idealized Greek statue, clear elastic skin, eyes so bright they seemed to be lighted from behind. She knew nothing changed in her expression, she was watching too closely to have missed a change, but inside her, ice formed and spread, and she was apart from that body, safely away from it. Is that what Werther had? she wanted to ask, wanted to scream. Is that why they wanted him so badly?

She started to move away and he put his hands on her shoulders, held her in place before the mirror. At his touch the ice shattered and she was yanked back from her

safe distance. Startled, she met his gaze again. "Would you?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. No one person could make such a decision. It's too soul-killing." It came out as a whisper, almost too low to be audible.

He leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "I'd better see if Saul needs any help." He left her, shaken and defenseless. When she lifted her glass, her hand was trembling.

Saul? Saul Werther. He called him Saul so naturally and easily that it was evident that they were on first-name terms, had been for a long time. Had Saul Werther promised him that kind of immunity? Was that the bond? Slowly what little she had read of immunology came back to her, the problems, the reasons that, for example, there had not been a better flu vaccination developed. The viruses mutate, she thought clearly, and although we are immune to one type, there are always dozens of new types. Each virus is different from others, each disease different, what works against one is ineffective against the rest. But Carmen believed. Saul Werther had convinced him, probably with no difficulty at all, considering his persuasiveness and his wide-ranging knowledge of what must seem like everything to someone as young and naive as Carmen was.

He was crazy then, with a paranoid delusional system that told him he could save the world from disease, if he chose to. He was God in his own eyes, Carmen his disciple.

She went to stand close to the fire, knowing the warmth could not touch the chill that was in her.

She would leave very early the next day. There were other eagles in other places, Florida, or upper New York, or Maine. And she would start filling applications for a job, dig out her old resume, update it ... If she stayed, Lasater would somehow find a way to use her to get inside this house, get to Saul Werther. And she knew that Saul and she were curiously allied in a way she could not at all understand. She could not be the one to betray him, no matter what he had done.

She hardly tasted dinner and when Saul expressed his concern, she said only that she was very tired. She found to her dismay that she was thinking of him as Saul, and now Carmen did not even pretend the master/servant roles any longer. Saul left his place at the table and came up behind her. She stiffened, caught Carmen's amused glance, and tried to relax again. Saul felt her shoulders, ran his hands up her neck.

"You're like a woman made of steel," he said, and began to massage her shoulders and neck. "Tension causes more fatigue than any muscular activity. Remember that blue float? Think of it bobbing up and down through the years. Nosed now and then by a dolphin, being avoided by a shark made wise by the traps of mankind. A white bird swoops low to investigate, then wheels away again. Rain pounding on it, currents dragging it this way and that. And bobbing along, bright in the sunlight, gleaming softly in moonlight, year after year ... Ah, that's better." She opened her

eyes wide. "Let's just have a bite of cheese and a sip of wine while Carmen clears the table, and then he'll take you home. You've had a long day."

He had relaxed her; his touch had been like magic working out the stiffness, drawing out the unease that had come over her that night. His voice was the most soothing she had ever heard. Perhaps one day he would read aloud ... She sipped her sweet wine and refused the cheese. He talked about the great vineyards of Europe.

"They know each vine the way a parent knows each child — every wart, every freckle, every nuance of temperament. And the vines live to be hundreds of years old..."

The flame was a transparent sheet of pale blue, like water flowing smoothly up and over the top of the log. Lyle looked through the flames; behind them was a pulsating red glow the entire length of the log. There was a knot, black against the sullen red. Her gaze followed the sheer blue flames upward, followed the red glow from side to side, and Saul's voice went on sonorously, easily...

"My dear, would you like to sleep in the spare room?"

She started. The fire was a bed of coals. She blinked, then looked away from the dying embers. At her elbow was her glass of wine, she could hear rain on the roof, nothing was changed. She did not feel as if she had been sleeping, but rather as if she had been far away, and only now had come back.

"We have a room that no one ever uses," Saul said.

She shook her head and stood up. "I want to go now," she said carefully, and held the back of the chair until she knew her legs were steady. She looked at her watch. Two? Everything seemed distant, unimportant. She yearned to be in bed sleeping.

Carmen held her coat, then draped a raincoat over her. "I'll bring the car to the porch," he said. She heard the rain again, hard and pounding. She did not know if she swayed. Saul put his arm about her shoulders and held her firmly until the car arrived; she did not resist, but rather leaned against him a bit. She was having trouble keeping her eyes open. Then Saul was holding her by both shoulders, looking at her. He embraced her and kissed her cheek, then led her down the stairs and saw her into the car. He'll get awfully wet, she thought, and could not find the words to tell him to go back inside, or even to tell him good night.

"Good thing I know this driveway well," Carmen said cheerfully, and she looked. The rain was so hard on the windshield the wipers could not keep it cleared, and beyond the headlights a wall of fog moved with them. She closed her eyes again.

Then the cold air was on her face, and Carmen's hand was firm on her arm as he led her up the stairs to her house, and inside. "I'll pull those boots off for you," he said, and obediently she sat down and let him. He built a fire and brought in more wood, then stood over her. "You have to go to bed," he said gently. "You're really beat tonight, aren't you?"

She had closed her eyes again, she realized, and made an effort to keep them open,

to stand up, to start walking toward the bedroom. She was surprised to find that her coat was off already, and the raincoat.

“Can you manage?” Carmen asked, standing in the bedroom doorway.

“Yes,” she said, keeping her face averted so he could not see that her eyes were closing again.

“Okay. I'll look in on you in the morning. Good night, Lyle.”

She got her sweater off, and the heavy wool slacks, but everything else was too much trouble, and finally she crawled into bed partially dressed.

The cabin was dark when she came awake. She could not think where she was for several minutes. She was very thirsty, and so tired she felt she could not move the cover away from her in order to get up. Her head pounded; she had a temperature, she thought crossly. In the beginning, the first several times she had come home soaked and shaking with cold, she had been certain she would come down with a cold, or flu, or something, but she had managed to stay healthy. Now it was hitting. Sluggishly she dragged herself from bed, went to the bathroom, relieved herself, and only then turned on the light to look for aspirin. She took the bottle to the kitchen; it would burn her stomach if she took it without milk or something. But when she poured a little milk into a glass, she could not bear the sight of it, and she settled for water after all. It was six o'clock. Too early to get up, too dark...

The cabin was cold and damp. She remembered how she had been chilled the day before and thought, that was when it started. She should have recognized the signals, should not have spent the day on the beach in the wind ... She had been walking back toward the bedroom, now she stopped. How had she got home?

There was no memory of coming home. She tried to remember the evening, and again there was nothing. They had gone to Saul's house, where she and Carmen had played a silly game, then dinner, then ... Then nothing.

Like the night before, she thought distantly, the words spaced in time with the pounding of her head. Ah, she thought, that was it. And still distantly, she wondered why it was not frightening that she could not remember two evenings in a row. She knew she was not crazy, because being crazy was nothing like this. She could even say it now, when she had been crazy she had been frightened of the lapses, the gaps in her life. And suddenly she was frightened again, not of the loss of memory, but of her acceptance of it with such a calm detachment that she might have been thinking of a stranger. She turned abruptly away from the bedroom and sat down instead on a straight chair at the kitchen table.

What was happening to her? She forced herself to go over the previous day step by step. Carmen's hands on her shoulders, her realization that Saul was crazy, paranoid, and her own panicky decision to leave today. She nodded. Leave, now, immediately. But she had to wait for Carmen to come, she thought plaintively. Her hands

tightened on the table, made fists. She saw herself walking toward Saul's open arms. Felt warmth of them about her, the comfort of resting her cheek on his shoulder ... Unsteadily she stood up and got another drink of water. Leave!

She sat down with the water, torn between two imperatives: she had to leave, and she had to wait for Carmen. If she stayed, she thought, sounding the words in her head, Lasater would use her somehow to get to Saul. Still she sat unmoving, wishing Carmen would come now, take the decision away from her. She pulled an open notebook close and with block letters drawn shakily she wrote *Leave*. She nodded and pushed herself away from the table.

Packing was too hard; she decided not to take some of her things — the typewriter, some of the books, one of her suitcases. Dully she thought of the refrigerator, of food turning bad. She shoved things into a bag and carried it to the car and blinked at the trunk already full. She put the food on the floor of the back seat and decided she had enough. It was eight o'clock when she left the house and started down the driveway. At the bottom, a large blond man waved to her. She made the stop, prepared to turn, and rolled her window open a crack.

“Yes?”

“Lasater wants to see you. He's in a camper in the park.” He went around the car, keeping his hand on the hood; at the passenger side, he opened the door and got in.

She looked at him, feeling stupid. Her door was locked, she had thought of it, but not that side. Slowly she pulled out onto the highway, climbed the hill, went down the other side thinking of nothing at all.

“There's the turnoff,” the blond man said.

She turned and drove carefully down the steep gravel road to the campsite. She stopped when he told her to. They both got out and he motioned toward the motor home at the end of the campgrounds. She walked to it.

“Lyle, what an early bird! I thought it would be later than this. Come on in. I'm making breakfast, Mexican eggs. You want some?”

The interior was exactly like the ads she had seen in magazines. There was a tiny living room area with a narrow sofa and two swivel chairs. There was a counter separating that part from the even smaller kitchen, and beyond that another curtained-off part. All very neat.

“Why did you send that man after me?”

“Afraid you'd be up and out early, and I wanted to talk to you.” He was dicing a red pepper. “Look, I can add another egg, no trouble at all. Pretty good dish.”

She shook her head.

He reached below the counter and brought out a coffee cup. “At least coffee,” he said, pouring. He brought her the cup and put it on a swing-out table by the side of the sofa. “Sit down, I'll be with you in a minute. You hung over?” His scrutiny was

quick, but thorough. He grinned sympathetically. "Have you told them anything about me?"

"No. I'm sick, I'm going to buy juice and aspirin and go to bed."

He backed away. "Christ! What a break! You okay? If you don't feel like driving to the village, I can send for stuff for you."

She shook her head again. "I'll go."

"Okay, but then in the sack, and stay until you're tiptop again, right? It's the rain. Jesus, I never saw so much rain. Has it ever stopped since you got here?"

He went on cheerfully as he added onions to the chili pepper, then a tomato. He tossed them all into a small pan and put it on one of the two burners of the stove. He poured himself more coffee as he stirred the sauce, and through it he kept talking.

"You know, it might be a good ploy, your getting sick now. You pile up in bed and he comes to visit, right? I mean, he digs you or would he have spent all day and most of the night with you? So he comes to visit and you ask him for a drink, a glass of water or juice, and later we come collect the glass, finis. Not bad actually."

Wearily she leaned her head back and closed her eyes. "You've been so smart," she said. "If I did what you asked and no more, I was safe enough. Hand over the prints, get my story on the eagles, forget the whole thing. If I poked around and learned anything more than that, you could always point to my medical record and say I'm just a nut."

"A plum," he said, connecting her. "You're a plum. I reached in and pulled out a real plum. You know there aren't any plums in plum pudding? Boy, was I ever disillusioned when I found that out." He had broken his eggs into a frying pan; he watched them closely, turned them, and then flipped them onto a plate. He poured his sauce over them. "No tortillas," he said regretfully. "Toast just isn't the same, but them's the breaks." Toast popped up in the toaster and he buttered it quickly, then brought everything to the living area. He pulled out another table and put his breakfast down. "Look, are you sure you don't want something, toast, a plain egg?"

"No."

"Okay." He reached under the table and flipped something and extended another section. "Presto chango," he said. Then he pulled a briefcase toward him, rummaged in it, and brought out an envelope, put it on the table. "While I eat, take a look at the stuff in there."

There were photographs. Lyle glanced through them and stopped when she came to one that had Saul Werther along with several other men, all looking ahead, as if they were part of an audience.

"Start with the top one," Hugh Lasater said, with his mouth full.

She looked at it more closely. It was an audience, mostly men, all with an attentive look. She studied it, searching for Saul, and finally found him, one tiny face among

the others. Two other photographs were similar, different audiences, but with Saul among the others. There was a photograph of four men walking; one of them was Saul. And there were two blown-up pictures of the larger audiences.

Lasater had finished eating by the time she pushed the photographs aside. "You recognize him without any trouble?"

"Of course."

"But in one his hair's almost white, and in another one it's dark brown. He had a mustache in one, didn't you notice it?"

"I assumed they're over a period of time. People change."

"Two years," Lasater said. He removed his plate and leaned back in his chair once more, holding coffee now. "One of those conferences was in Cold Spring Harbor, one's Vanderbilt, the last one's Cal Tech. He gets around to the scientific meetings. And at each of those conferences there was an incident. A young scientist either vanished or died mysteriously."

Lyle closed her eyes. Don't tell me, she wanted to plead, but no words came; she realized her head was pounding in time with the booming of the surf. The booms meant another storm was coming. When the waves changed from wind waves to the long swells that formed a thousand miles offshore, or at the distant Asian shores, and when the waves did not dash frantically at random intervals, but marched with a thunderous tread upon the land, there would be a gale or worse. Saul had told her about the difference, and her experience here had confirmed it, although she had not been aware of the difference before his mini-lecture.

"I'm leveling with you," Lasater said now. "I want to wrap this up and be done with it. You must want to be done with it too. Lyle, are you listening to me?"

"Yes. My eyes hurt, my head aches. I told you, I'm sick."

"Okay, okay. I'll make it short. Picture Berlin back in the thirties. You see *Cabaret*?" She shook her head slightly. "Oh. Well, Berlin's recovering from the worst economic slump in history, expanding in all directions under Hitler. At the university they're developing the first electron microscope. And at the university is Herr Professor Hermann Franck, who is one of the pioneers in biochemistry. He's using the prototypes of the electron microscope fifteen years before anyone else has it. Right? Franck has a Jewish graduate student working under him and the work is frenzied because Franck is tired, he wants to quit, go back to his family estate and write his memoirs. Only he can't because the work they're doing is too important. He's on the verge of something as big in his field as Einstein's work was in his, maybe bigger."

"How do you know any of this?" Lyle asked.

"There were Gestapo stooges throughout the university. One of them tried to keep up with Franck and his work, made weekly reports that are mostly garbage because he wasn't being cut in on any of the real secret stuff. But enough's there to know. And, of course, Franck was publishing regularly. Then, something happened, and, I

admit, this part gets shady. His grad student was beaten and left for dead by a youth gang. The professor applied for permission to take the body home for burial, and that's the last anyone knows of either of them. Obviously the kid didn't die. He survived, maybe killed the professor, maybe just hung around long enough and the old guy died of natural causes. He had a bum heart. Anyway, the student ended up with the papers, the notes on the work, everything. We know that because it all vanished. Eventually when Franck didn't show up at work, the Gestapo got interested enough to make a search, and found nothing. The war thickened, things settled, and Franck was forgotten, another casualty. Then twenty years ago the Gestapo reports came to light and a mild flurry of activity was started, to see if there was anything worth going after. Nothing. About twelve years ago a bright young scientist working on his thesis dragged out Franck's articles, and there was an explosion that hasn't stopped sending out ripples yet. Bigger than Einstein, they're saying now."

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Maybe three people do know. But for twelve years we've been looking for that student, now an elderly gentleman, who makes it to various scientific conferences and kills young researchers. We want him, Lyle, in the worst way."

Lyle stood up. "It's the best story yet. They keep getting better."

"I know. I can't top this one, though. He's crazy, Lyle. Really crazy. His family was wiped out without a trace, it must have done something to him. Or the beating scrambled his brains. Whatever. But now he's crazy, he's systematically killing off anyone who comes near Franck's research. He's able to keep up with what's going on. He can pass at those conferences. Maybe some of the time he actually works in a university somewhere. But if we can get a set of prints, we'll know. The Gestapo had them on file, they fingered every Jew in the country. All we want to do is see if they match. Maybe they won't. We'll step out, go chase our tails somewhere else."

"And if they do match?"

"Honey, we'll be as gentle as a May shower. Somewhere there are a lot of notebooks, working notes, models, God knows what all. He can't keep all that junk in his head, and besides, he was just a student. Franck had been on it for years. It's on paper somewhere. We want him to lead us to it, and then he'll be picked up ever so carefully. There's a real fear that he'll suicide if he suspects we're anywhere near him, and he's too important to let that happen. He'll be better treated than the Pea Princess, believe me."

She went to the door. Her eyes were burning so much it hurt to keep them open; she was having trouble focusing. She still did not believe him, but she no longer knew which part of the story she could not accept. It was all too complicated and difficult. She wanted desperately to sleep.

Lasater moved to her side, his hand on the door knob. "Honey, we're not the only ones looking for him. And we are probably the nicest ones. Science is pretty

damned public, you know.”

“Now you wave the Russian threat.”

“And others,” he said vaguely. “But also, there are pharmaceutical corporations that know no nationality. It's a real race and everyone in it is playing to win. Even if by default.”

“What does that mean?”

“The ultimate sour grapes, Lyle. A really poor loser might decide if he can't have the prize neither can anyone else.”

He opened the door. “Look, no rain. I must be in California. Go on, get your juice and aspirin, and then pile in the sack for a day or two. I'll be around, see you later.”

He knew he had frightened her at last. It had taken the big guns, but there was a trick to knowing when to show strength and when to play it cozy. She was shaken. She had to have time now to let it sink in that her own position was not the safest possible. But she was a smart cookie, he thought with satisfaction, and it would sink in. She would get the point soon enough that this was too big for her to obstruct. The next time he saw her, she would ask what assurance she had that once done, she would be truly out of it, and he would have to reassure her, pour a little oil on her conscience.

Hugh Lasater was fifty, and, he admitted once in a while to himself, he was tired. Watching Lyle walk to her car, he thought of what it would be like to have a woman like her, to sit by a fire when the wind blew, play gin, read, listen to music, cuddle in bed. There had been three women along the years that he had tried that scenario with, and each time what he got was not exactly what he had been after. The women he liked to cuddle in bed were not the sort who played gin by the fire, and, he said to himself, vicy vercy. Lyle drove up the gravel trail to the highway and he motioned to Milt Follett to come back inside.

Not Lyle, or anyone like her, he decided emphatically. Too old, too dumpy. He hoped she had not spread flu germs around.

“Get up there,” he told Follett, “keep an eye on her place. Werther's sure to pay a sick call, and when he leaves, the house is yours. She won't get in the way.” He did not believe Follett would find the prints, either. In his mind was a scene where Taney handed them to him; he believed in that scene.

Follett scowled. “It's going to rain again.”

“Take an umbrella. Rain's good cover. They'll be in a hurry to get inside, you won't have to stay so far back.”

Follett cursed and almost absently Hugh Lasater slapped him. “Get your gear together. You'd better take some sandwiches, coffee. He might not show until after dark.”

Follett's fists were as large as sacks of potatoes, and as knobby. “Relax,” Hugh

Lasater said. "Someone has to teach you manners." He began to gather the photographs, dismissing Milton Follett, who was, after all, no more than a two-legged dog, trained in obedience and certain indispensable tricks, but who was inclined to yap too much.

Two days, he thought cheerfully. After all those years, two more days was not much. He had been in the Company when Cushman made the connection between Werther (or David Rechetnik) and Loren Oley's cancer research after Oley had vanished. Hugh Lasater had winkled out the details over a fourteen-month period, the Berlin connection, the old professor, everything he had told Lyle. Cushman had not then or ever grasped the implications and had shelved the investigation, but Lasater had stayed with it, working on it when he had time, keeping his own file. And four years ago Lasater had had enough to take his walk. He retired, pleading battle fatigue, nerves. He knew he had covered his traces so well that no one would ever be able to backtrack him. You're not going to write a book? they had asked, and he had laughed at the idea. A year later he had a new job, and was still on it. And in two days, he would know. But he already knew. He had known for over a year.

He sat with his long legs stretched across the motor home and made his plans while Follett grumbled as he began to put together sandwiches. Outside, the surf was booming like a cannon.

Inside Lyle's head the surf was booming also. She flinched from time to time, and she was squinting against the light even though the sky was solidly overcast now. Her legs ached and her arms felt leaden. A gust of wind shook her car and she knew the rising wind would make the coast road hazardous to drive. It was not too bad where the hills were high on the east side of the road, but every gap, every low spot, every bridge opened a wind channel, and it howled through, threatening to sweep anything on the road through with it. She came to the village and stopped at the supermarket. She had not had time to become very friendly with anyone in town, but they all accepted her by now with amiable good will. Most of the townspeople she dealt with seemed to know her name although she knew none of theirs. The woman at the checkout stand in the grocery nodded when Lyle entered.

"Morning. How're you, Mrs. Taney? That's a real storm blowing in this time. Got gale warnings up at Brookings already. We'll get it."

"Worse than last week's?"

"Last week?" The woman had to stop to think. "Oh, that wasn't much at all. This one's a Pacific gale. Better make sure you have kerosene for your lamp, and plenty of wood inside. Could lose the lights."

Lyle thanked her and moved down the aisle and began selecting her groceries. Juice, ginger ale. She remembered being sick as a little girl and her mother bringing her iced ginger ale with a bent straw. For a moment she was overcome with yearning for her mother's comforting presence. She saw straws and picked them up. Her pump was

electric, she remembered, and picked up more juice. If the electric lines went down she would have no water until they were restored. She knew she had to drink a lot; she was parched right now in fact. When she got to the checkout she was surprised by the amount and variety of potables she had picked up. Irritably she regarded them; she should put some of the stuff back, but it was too much effort and she paid for them and wheeled the cart outside to put her bag in the back seat. The wind was stronger, the gusts took her breath away. And the pounding of the surf was like a physical blow to her head again and again and again.

Before she started her engine, she found the aspirin bottle and slipped it inside her pocket where she could get it easily. She put a can of Coke on the seat next to her and then turned on her key.

Salmon Key was on a bluff a hundred feet above sea level. On the streets running parallel to the coastline the wind blew fitfully, not too strong, but at each intersection and on the cross streets it was a steady forty miles an hour with gusts much stronger. Lyle went through an intersection, fought the steering wheel to keep her car in her lane, and then in the middle of the next block parked at the curb. She knew she could not drive up the coast against that wind.

She put her head down on the steering wheel and tried to think of someplace to go. The motel was closed for the season. She knew no one in town well enough to ask for a room for the night. Back to her house? She was afraid to go back. Saul would give her something to make her sleep again.

She jerked upright with the thought and knew it was right. He had given her something both nights. Why? She had no answer, only the question that kept slipping away as if she was not supposed to ask it, as if she had touched on a taboo that sent her mind skittering each time she came too close.

She remembered a gravel road that led from town up into the hills, following Salmon Creek to a picnic spot, going on upward past that. A logging road, dirt and rough, no doubt, but protected from the wind, and unused now since logging had stopped. She drove again, turned at the next corner, and headed back toward Salmon Creek. It churned under the wind, whitecaps slapped against the boats at anchor at the docks. No one was in sight as she turned onto the gravel road, and within seconds she was out of town with only the grass on both sides of the road. At the picnic grounds she stopped to take aspirin and drink the Coke. She was very feverish, she knew. This had been a good idea, she decided, waiting for the aspirin to dull her headache and ease the ache in her arms and legs. She would rest until the storm passed — they never lasted more than a few hours — and by the time it was quiet again, probably after dark, she would go on, drive to Portland, return the car to the agency, get a flight back home.

She had no home, she remembered. She had leased her apartment. But them were people she could go to, she argued. Jackie, Chloe, Mildred and Jake ... Neither Lasater nor Saul could find her here, and tomorrow she would be safe. The aspirin was not helping very much; reluctantly she turned on the key and drove; the little

park was too open, too accessible. Now the road deteriorated rapidly, from gravel to dirt, to little more than ruts. She should have stayed at the picnic area, she realized. No one would be there on a day like this, and she could not find a place to turn around, or to park, or ... The road forked. Both sides began to climb steeply after this junction. Maybe she could turn around here. It took her a long time, and she knew she was scratching up the car, and scraping the bottom on rocks, but finally she had it pointing back down the dirt road and, exhausted, she turned off the key again and leaned back with her eyes closed.

The wind was distant, high in the trees, hardly noticeable at ground level. She could not hear the surf, and that surprised her because her head was still pounding with the same rhythm and urgency as before when she had thought the thunderous waves were causing her headache. The rain was starting finally a pattering at first that eased up; soon it was falling harder. She had to get some things from the trunk. Warm clothes, her poncho, her afghan. It would get cold in the car. Still she sat quietly, wishing she did not have to move again for a long time. The rain let up and now she forced herself out. She was appalled by the mess in the trunk. She had tossed stuff in randomly. Her camera case was not there, she realized, and remembered she had left it at Saul's house when they had gone down the beach. She had no further memory of it. She found a long coat, her poncho, boots, the afghan, notebooks. She knew she would not want anything to read; her eyes were bothering her too much. There was a fire banked just behind them.

She arranged the car, put down both front seats all the way, made sure her bag of groceries was within reach, and the can opener she kept in the glove compartment, and only then allowed herself to lie down and pull the afghan over her and finally close her eyes. The rain on the car roof was too loud, but presently she grew used to it and found it soothing. She slept.

Her sleep was fitful and restless, beset by dreams. When she wakened, she was very thirsty; her lips were parched, and her eyes felt swollen. Her headache had intensified and her body hurt all over. She swallowed more aspirin and drank orange juice with it. She slept and dreamed:

Saul was her lover and they ran down the beach like children, hand in hand, laughing, tumbling in the surf, which was as warm as blood. They started to make love in the gentle surf, and she woke up suddenly, aching with desire.

She should drink again, she thought, but it seemed too much effort; she was too tired. She was curled in a tight ball, chilled throughout, and burning with fever. She would die, she thought then, and they would find her here one day and wonder what had happened to her. She dreamed they were finding her, poking at her body with sticks because no one wanted to touch her, and she woke up again. This time she rolled until she could reach a can of juice and she drank it all, and only then remembered she should have taken aspirin. She pushed herself up enough to reach the bottle, and she opened a second large can of juice and took aspirin again. It was nearly dark, the rain was hard and steady. She could not tell if the wind was blowing.

She dreamed she was telling her mother she had to go to the bathroom and her mother said not now, dear, wait. She woke up squatting near the car; the shock of icy rain on her back, face, arms, thighs brought her out of delirium. She was shaking so hard she could hardly get the car door open again, and, inside, her hands seemed uncontrollable as she pulled on her clothes. She could not remember undressing. Her hair was wet, ice water ran down her back, down her face. She found a dishtowel she kept in the car to wipe the windshield with and she dried her hair with it as much as she could. It was too dark to see her watch. She was so cold that she turned on the car engine and let it run long enough for the heater to warm the car. Then she was so hot that she began to tear off her clothes again.

She heard Carmen's voice: "Don't be scared. I'll come get you and take you home. We'll take care of you." She looked for him, but he did not come. He lied, she thought dully. Just like Lasater. Saul and Carmen examined her carefully; they looked at her throat, her eyes, listened to her heart, took a blood sample, and took her blood pressure reading. She answered Saul's questions about her medical history, her parents, everything. It was reasonable and thorough, and he wrote everything down.

"I'm dying," she said, and he nodded. She woke up. She remembered hanging the dishtowel outside the window to get it wet and cold. She dragged it inside and wrapped it around her head. She could hardly move now because of weakness and pain. It was not the flu after all, she thought distantly, as if diagnosing someone else. He had poisoned her, she thought clearly. He was paranoid and he had known from the start that she was a spy. He told her so. He poisoned her and now she was dying from it. And they would find her body and prod it with sticks. She wept softly, then slept.

At noon the wind was rising enough to shake the motor home from time to time. The trees around the campsite bowed even lower, and the air tasted of salt. The tent in the campsite collapsed, started to fly away. The kid who had been camping out rolled it up and stuffed it in the trunk of his car, and then he joined Lasater, who was standing at the railing of the park, overlooking the lagoon. The normally placid, protected waters were churning around and around; the wind-driven waves were meeting the outgoing tide in a free-for-all.

"Follett says something's wrong at Taney's house," the boy said, close to Lasater's ear.

"What?"

"Didn't say—"

"Tell Turk to get his ass up there and find out." The boy watched the water another second, then left, leaning against the wind. A few minutes later the rain started and Lasater went inside the motor home. Follett came in dripping a short time later.

"She never came back," he said, stripping off his wet clothes. "Werther's kid came over in the car at ten, carrying her camera gear. He went inside and came back out,

still with the camera bag. He left. Been back twice on foot. Must wade the creek and come up the bank.”

Lasater watched him with loathing. Follett's flesh shook when he moved; he had fatty flaps on his chest, like a woman who had been sucked dry.

“After he left the second time, I went to the house and looked around. She's flown. Half her stuff's still there, as if she wanted to fool you into thinking she'd be back. She left the refrigerator on, but she stripped it, and her toothpaste, deodorant, stuff like that, all gone.”

Lasater could feel his fury grow and spread as if it were heartburn and it scalded him just as heartburn did. She had sat there looking stupid, pretending she was sick, and all the time she had her car packed, her plans to skip out all made, everything go. And they were back at the starting post.

Wordlessly he got out a map and looked at the roads, the distances. She could be halfway to Portland by now. And he did not have a man in Portland. Or, if she was heading south, she would be in the Siskiyou approaching the California border.

“Okay, so we change plans,” he said brusquely. “Take me up to her place and then you get down to the village and ask around, find out who saw her, which way she was going. Come back up to her place. And for God's sake, keep your mouth closed until we have a new play to run with. Let's go.”

She had taken out maybe a third of the stuff she had brought in, he guessed, judging from the condition of the living room where there were still books and papers, and even mail. She had not bothered to open many of the letters. He did so and scanned them quickly. Nothing. He went through her drawers, and the darkroom, where there were many prints of the coast, trees, hills, and an empty nest. Nothing. She had started to make notes in a new large notebook, nothing. His search was very methodical and when he finished, everything was as she had left it, and everything had been examined. Nothing.

He built a fire in the stove and made coffee. She had cleaned the refrigerator but had not taken the coffee or sugar, or anything from the shelves. It looked to him as if she had left in a dead run. Why? Something had scared her out of here, what? Not his doing; she was already running by the time he had talked to her that morning. Werther? He heard his teeth grinding together and made himself stop. His dentist had warned him that unless he quit doing that he would be in dentures within a few years. He even did it in his sleep, he thought disgustedly. The thought of wearing dentures made him uneasy and irritable. It made him want to work his dentist over.

He sat facing the door and waited for Follett to come back, and prepared his story. By the time the soft tapping on the door stirred him, he had made a phone call, and he had the new play ready.

Carmen stood with the wind whirling his hair into his face. “Is Mrs. Taney here yet?” he asked, and the wind swept his words away.

Lasater stepped back and motioned him inside. “What? Are we going to have a

hurricane or something?" He slammed the door as soon as Carmen was inside. "My God! It must be a hurricane!"

"I don't think it's that bad. Is Mrs. Taney back?"

"Oh, you're a friend of hers? Do you know where she is?"

Carmen shook his head. "Who are you?"

"Oh. But we do take turns, you understand. I'm Richard Vos, assistant editor at Rushman Publications. Your turn."

"Carmen Magone, just a friend. I got worried that she's out in this weather. She's sick with flu or something."

"When did you see her? Today?"

"Last night. How'd you get here?"

"I was just going to ask you that. I didn't see a car out there."

"I walked over from next door. You walk in from New York?"

Lasater didn't like him, too young, too flip, too bright-eyed. Mostly, too young. He had found his dislike of young men increasing exponentially during the last few years, and while he was prepared intellectually to admit it was jealousy, that did not prevent the feeling nor did it help once he recognized his antipathy had been roused yet again...

"I'm with a friend," he said. "Milt Follett, you ever see him play? We're doing his book on college football. He's gone to the village to buy some things. We thought Lyle would be here, she said she would be here. I brought her contracts to her." He indicated his briefcase, which he had brought in with him. Aggrievedly he went on, "I could have mailed them, but she said she'd be here, and Bobby, her editor, said it would be nice to visit and see how it's coming, since I had to be in Portland anyway to see why Follett's stalled. We'll end up with a ghostwriter," he confided. "I could have mailed them," he said again then. "You say you saw her last night? Did she say anything about going somewhere for a few days? Maybe she went somewhere to wait out the storm. Maybe she's scared of storms."

Carmen shrugged. "She didn't say, but she seemed pretty sick, running a fever. I've got to go. If she comes in will you ask her to give us a call?"

"Camping out with a buddy?"

"Not exactly. See you later, Mr. Vos." Carmen had not moved more than a few inches inside the door, and now he slipped out before Lasater could ask anything else.

That was a real bust, he admitted to himself. Briefly he had considered slapping the kid and giving the old man a call, tell him the punk fell and broke his leg, wait for him to drive over to pick him up and then grab him. How easy it could be, he mused. Grab him, make him tell us where the paperwork is, be done with it. He took a deep

breath and went back to his seat on the couch. Maybe later it would come to that, but not yet. Taney would stay out a day or two, simmer down, but she would come back for her stuff. Someone like her wouldn't abandon a thousand-dollar camera. He'd twist her arm just a little and get what he needed that way. No suspicions, no fuss. And then, he thought coldly, Mrs. Taney, you and I have a little party coming up, just the two of us. First work, then play, right? Besides, he added to himself, the old man made a habit of killing off kids Carmen's age or a little older. No way could he believe Werther would lift a hand for this one. He made a bet with himself that Follett would suggest they grab the kid and use him for bait.

All afternoon Carmen was out in the white Volvo during the height of the storm. There was a report that he had shown up at the park twenty miles down the road. He had checked it out, then had left, heading south. An hour later he had driven past again. He had checked out the Lagoon camp, and had gone north from there. Looking for Taney, Lasater knew. Why? It had to be something that had happened at their house. He was convinced the old man had said or done something that had scared her off. At dark the Volvo made its way back up the steep driveway next door, and stayed put the rest of the night. Early the next morning Carmen was at it again. The storm had blown itself out overnight.

At eleven Lasater could stand it no longer and he called Werther's house. After six rings the old man answered, and Lasater released the breath he had been holding. Belatedly it had occurred to him to wonder if Werther might sneak out in the trunk of the Volvo. He told his story about being an assistant to Lyle's New York editor, expressed his concern about her, suggested calling the police.

"I have done so," Werther said. "They obviously were not very impressed. You, however, have a vested interest in her, and you had an appointment with her that she missed. They would have to pay more attention if you voiced your fears."

Lasater had no intention of calling the police, and he was mildly surprised that Werther had been willing to bring them in, if he had. Hugh Lasater seldom expected the truth from anyone. Truth, he was convinced, was of such a nebulous nature that no one should expect it more than once or twice within a lifetime. You have to ferret out facts, data, scraps of information wherever you can find them and arrange them in a pattern that seems to make sense, always knowing that tomorrow you might have to rearrange the same bits and pieces to make a different pattern. That was sufficient, that was truth, always relative, always changeable, always manipulable.

Late in the afternoon the sun broke through the clouds and the air was spring-warm and fresh. The sea had turned a deep unwrinkled blue; it rose and fell slightly like a blanket over the chest of a sleeping woman moved by gentle breathing. Sunset was breathtakingly beautiful without a color left out. Carmen returned home an hour after sunset. He was alone in his Volvo. He looked exhausted, the report said, and mud was so high on the car that he must have been up and down logging roads all day.

At dark they all settled in to wait yet another day. Lasater felt he was caught up in a preordained configuration like the constellations of the zodiac, where each star is

going at its own rate of speed in its own direction as a result of actions started long ago, which today resulted in this particular arrangement of parts. Although their motion might be imperceptible, they were all on the move; some of the stars were as close as they would ever get to one another and their destiny now was to separate, draw farther and farther apart. Others, he knew, were on a collision course that was equally determined and unavoidable.

He was nervous, and was keeping in very close contact with the watchers up and down the coast road. He had a man in Portland now, and another one on I-5. If anyone moved, he would be ready, and eventually someone had to move. Until then he had to wait. He had ordered Follett out to the motor home when he felt he would have to kill him if he remained in sight another minute, yawning, scratching, foot-tapping, too dumb to read, too restless to sit still. He wanted to go over and peek inside Werther's house, see what they were up to, and he knew there was no way. Heavy drapes, window shades; they were well hidden.

By late afternoon the next day fog moved in after a morning brilliant with sunshine. Carmen had gone out at dawn, and was back by two, and Lasater began pulling his watchers closer to the driveway. Fog was the most treacherous enemy of a surveillance job. The white car could move through it like a ghost, appearing to a watcher to be no more than a thicker drift, if it was spotted at all. The walkie-talkie unit remained silent through the long afternoon; no one was moving yet.

That afternoon Lasater felt like a chrysalis tightly wrapped in a white cocoon. The way the fog pressed on the windows gave him the illusion that the windows were giving, bowing inward slightly but inexorably. He half-expected to see tendrils of fog forced through small entrances here and there, writhing like snakes as they squeezed in, then flowing down to the floor where they would spread out like wide shallow rivers, join, become a solid white layer, and then begin to rise.

He got out the book on hawks, which he had started, then put aside. He did not like books on natural history, could not understand people who became rapturous over animals or scenery. From time to time he looked up swiftly from the book as if only by catching it unawares would he be able to detect the fog if it did start to penetrate the house.

He came to a chapter that dealt with Sir John Hawkwood, a fourteenth-century mercenary, and his interest quickened. Here was a man he could understand thoroughly. With no nonsense about loyalty to a state or church or any abstract principle, he had gone about his business of hiring himself out to the highest bidder, had done the job contracted for, then gone on to the next without looking back. He had used the weaknesses of others against them and in the end had been rich and honored. Taney was sharp, Lasater thought then; she had made her point that Hawkwood and those like him somehow had been bypassed by one aspect of the evolutionary growth of consciousness. They had not achieved the level of conscience that would necessarily act as a rein on their desires. Unlike the hawk, also without mercy, they were creatures whose needs were not immediate and inseparable from survival. Forever barred from the garden where the innocents still dwelled, and

stalled on the ladder of evolution, they existed apart; symbol-making, dissembling, unrecognized before they acted and often after they acted, they were capable of incalculable evil.

Lasater snapped the book shut. She was going too far, talking as if those people had some kind of deficiency like a diabetic. And she contradicted herself, he thought angrily, first talking about all the stuff hawks grabbed for lunch: baby birds, rabbits, chicks, whatever they could lift, and then saying they could do no wrong. If he took something, she would be on his case fast. He despised people who were that unaware of their own double standards.

“Taney,” he muttered, “deserves whatever she gets.”

Sunshine on her face awakened Lyle. She stirred, turned her head fretfully, and slowly drifted to full consciousness. Almost resentfully, she pulled the afghan over her face and tried to go back to sleep, but she was fully awake. She did not move again for several minutes. She had not expected to wake up. She remembered snatches of consciousness, pain, fever, thirst, and she remembered that she had gone through the stages she had read about. She had felt self-pity, then anger, fury actually that this was happening to her, alone in the wilderness. That had passed and she had felt only resignation, and finally anticipation. She had read about those stages preceding death, and when she realized she was looking forward to the end, she had thought with a start: it's true then. And now she was awake.

Her fever was gone, or at least way down, and she felt only a terrible weakness and thirst. Her mouth was parched, her throat felt raw, her lips were cracked. She raised herself to her elbow and looked for something to drink and saw a can of orange juice; she had not been able to open it the last time she had been awake. She reached for it and pulled it close to her but was too tired to find the opener and finish the task. She rested until her thirst drove her to renewed effort and this time she found the bottle opener and punctured the can with it, only to find she could not lift it to her mouth. Straws were scattered over the car; she groped for one and finally got it in the can and sipped the drink. She rested, drank again, then once more. By then she could pull herself up to a sitting position. Even propped up against the door, she found sitting too strenuous, and lay down again. She dozed, not for long; the sun was still on her when she opened her eyes the next time.

For the next several hours she sipped juice, dozed, sat up for seconds at a time, then minutes. She tried to remember what she had done through her ordeal, tried to remember her dreams. In one of them Lasater's face had grown so large it took up her entire field of vision; it had said, “Are you going to do it?” When the mouth opened, it became a terrible black pit.

“No.”

“Honey, why can't you lie just a little?”

“Why can't you not lie just a little?”

“You make categorical statements and then feel obligated to live up to them. Now I have to get you out of here so I can bring in someone else.” He shot her and while he was dragging her down the beach for the tide to take, he kept complaining, “You’re nothing but a headache, you know? What would it have cost you?”

“Stop,” she said then. He released her and she stood up laughing.

He stared at her aghast, then furiously stalked away. She thought of the dream and could make no sense of it. It was either straightforward and meant exactly what it said, or it was so deep it eluded her. What would it have cost? she thought. She was not certain. Maybe she would have done a good thing even, but it was dirty; she felt certain of that, although she would have been unable to defend it if it were ever proven that Saul was a killer, or a smuggler, or whatever else they might claim.

She remembered a silver rain when all the fir trees had been transformed into Christmas trees heavily decorated with tinsel. She had been delighted with it, and if she had been able to get up and go out into it, she would have done so. That must have been when she was at her most feverish, her most delirious, she decided.

In a dream she had agonized over having to choose between Saul and Carmen, and they had waited patiently while she vacillated. She smiled; the rest of the dream was gone, forgotten, and probably it was just as well. Resting now she thought of the meaning of that dream: although she was almost ashamed of her admission, she was attracted to both of them. It was because they both accepted her unquestioningly, with approval, and either they were blind to her flaws, or thought them so unimportant that they actually became insignificant. She could not remember being treated exactly like this before. When she had been younger there had been the standard boyfriends, a proposal or two before she and Gregory had decided to make their arrangement permanent. All that, she thought decisively, had been biological, a burning in the groin, an itch between her legs, nothing more. Even at the height of passion, she had always known that Gregory was fantasizing someone else, someone made up of bits and pieces of movie stars and pictures in magazines. She never had talked about this with anyone because she had accepted it the way she accepted hunger and thirst and growing old, everything that was part of being human. But Saul and Carmen had not looked at her as if they were comparing her to an ideal who existed only in their heads. They had looked at her, had seen her as she was, and had accepted her. And she loved them both for it.

They were not afraid, she thought; everyone else she knew was afraid, at least most of the time. She remembered telling Saul she had been afraid all her life without ever knowing of what or why. Gregory was afraid. Mike's death had terrified him, as it had terrified her. She, blaming herself, had lived in dread of the day he would also blame her, because that would have justified her guilt. He must have felt the same way, she realized, and felt a rush of sympathy for him that she had not known before. He had needed to run all the way across the country, just as she had needed to run to the woods, to the hills.

She thought of Hugh Lasater, whose fear made him try to manipulate reality by

manipulating truth, but the reality was always there, just out of sight, out of hearing, with its infinite terror.

Thinking about Hugh Lasater, she sat up again, this time without the accompanying dizziness she had felt before. She knew she needed food, her weakness was at least partly attributable to no food for ... How long? It had not occurred to her to wonder until now. She tried the radio, nothing but static up here in the hills. She began to think of bread in milk, chicken broth steaming hot and fragrant. She settled for an overripe banana and ate almost half of it before she was too tired to bother with any more. She dozed, wakened, tried another banana, and later in the afternoon decided she had to try to get to the creek for water. She had stale bread, and wanted only some water to soften it in.

She was sticky from spilled juice, she felt grimier than she had been since childhood. The creek was no more than fifteen feet from her car but she had to stop to rest twice before she reached it. The dishtowel she had been using to cool herself with was muddy, filthy; she could imagine what her face looked like. The water was shockingly cold; she held the towel in it until some of the dirt was washed away, wrung it out slightly and then washed her face and neck. She was seized with a chill then. Shaking so hard that she spilled almost as much water as she had been able to get in the juice can, she started back to the car, thinking of the heater, of the afghan, of going back to sleep wrapped snugly in her poncho, covered from toe to head, sleeping deeply without dreams ... And she knew she could not do that, not now. It was time to go home.

The heater took a long time to warm the car. She sat huddled in the afghan until then, leaning against the door, her eyes closed. She was afraid to lie down for fear she would fall asleep. She kept seeing her own bed, her covers, sheets, a hot bath, something hot to drink, coffee. She wanted to be home before dark, and she knew it would take her a long time to get there.

She ate a few bites of bread softened in water, and marveled at how hungry she was and how little she could eat at any one time. Two bites of this, three of that. She imagined her body as a giant sponge, absorbing water, juice, whatever she could pour into it, sucking it up greedily, dividing it fairly among her parched tissues. Her tongue felt more normal, and her throat hardly hurt now; she imagined her blood as sluggish as molasses from the refrigerator, demanding more and more of the fluids, stirring, starting to flow again, scolding...

She smiled at her nonsense and turned on the key, and this time she started down the dirt road. Within ten minutes she had to stop. Her arms were quivering with fatigue; her feet were leaden. And when Hugh Lasater turned up with more threats, more demands, she thought, with her head resting on the steering wheel, she would tell him to get out and, if he did not go, she would call the police and complain.

And she would call Saul and tell him a man was asking strange questions about him. No more than that. If he knew he was guilty of something, it would be enough. And if he was guilty of murder, she asked herself, was she willing to be his accomplice?

She couldn't judge him, she knew, and she turned on the key and started her lurching drive down the hill, down into fog.

She could remember nothing of this road, which was so steep and curvy it seemed now a miracle that she had driven up it. It twisted and turned and plummeted down, faithfully following the white-water creek. As she went down, the fog thickened until by the time she knew she had come far enough to have reached the picnic area, she could see no farther than a few feet in any direction. She knew she had missed the park when her wheels began to throw gravel. She stopped many times, sometimes turning off the motor, sometimes letting it run while she rested.

Then, with her front wheels almost on the coast highway she rested for the last time. She would not dare stop again on the highway. She closed her eyes visualizing the rest of her route. The steep climb straight up, over the crest, down again, straight all the way to the lagoon, then the sharp upward curve around the far side of the lagoon, down to the bridge and her own drive. She could leave the car in the driveway and walk the rest of the way. Not soon, but eventually. Reluctantly she started the last leg of her journey.

One more day, Lasater told himself, he'd give her one more day to show, and if she didn't ... He had no other plan and his mind remained stubbornly blank when he tried to formulate one. He was certain she would be back before his self-imposed deadline.

He should have used a professional, he thought suddenly, as if stricken with terrible hindsight. If this fizzled it would be used against him that he had gone with an amateur when there were people available who could have done the job the first week. He worried about it, playing it this way and that, looking at the possibilities, and then he left it, just as a well-fed cat leaves a mouse corpse behind. He did not believe Werther would have let any professional inside his house. He had not stayed loose and on the prowl all these years, first eluding the Nazis, and then customs, whatever had come along, by being stupid. He had accepted Taney because she was an amateur, and Taney had to deliver. Lasater still held the image of Taney handing over the evidence he needed. It was a strong image, strong enough to keep him immobile in her house while he waited for her to return.

It was nearly five when he heard the car in the driveway. A minute passed, another, and finally he could wait no longer; he stamped out into the fog to see why she was stalling. He yanked open her car door to find her slumped forward against the steering wheel. He thought she was out, but at the sound of the door opening she stirred and raised her head. She looked like hell. He had not taken it seriously that she might be really sick; he had been convinced that she had run because her nerve had failed. But she was sick all right.

“Lyle, baby, you look like death warmed over. Come on, let's get you inside.” He helped her out, then steadied her as she walked to the house. “Jesus, you had us all worried. Carmen's been all over the hills looking for you, they called the cops even.”

They had entered the house by then and he deposited her on the couch. "What can I get you? Are you okay sitting up like that?"

"Just get out," she said. Her voice was hoarse as if she had a sore throat. "I won't do anything for you. I don't care what you threaten. Get out."

"Okay, okay. I'll give Werther a call. I told him I would when you showed up. He's been worried." She started to get up and he pushed her back. She was too weak to resist his shove, which actually had been quite gentle. For the first time he wondered if she was going to get well, if she had pneumonia or something.

Carmen answered the first ring. "Mrs. Taney's back," Lasater said. "She's really sick, she might even be dying. I think she should be taken to a hospital, except there's no way you could get there through that fog. Is there a doctor anywhere nearby?" He knew there was no doctor closer than twenty-six miles. Carmen said he would tell Mr. Werther and hung up. "Do that, kiddo," Lasater murmured. He turned again to Lyle who had her head back, her eyes closed. "Listen, sweetie, they think I'm Richard Vos, a New York editor. I told them I had your contracts for you. They don't need to know more than that. Got it?"

Her nod was almost imperceptible.

"Okay. He'll probably send the kid over. When he gets here, I'm leaving. I'll be back at the park by the lagoon. You just get some rest now, take it easy for a couple of days. I'll see you later in the week."

Again she moved her head slightly. "I won't help you," she said.

"Okay, just don't worry about it for now. Get well first. And, Lyle, don't tell them anything. You're up to your pink little ears in this and it's classified. You blab, and, honey, they can put you away for a long time."

She started to take off her coat and when he touched her in order to help, she flinched involuntarily. He shrugged and moved away again. Her eyes were sunken, her face haggard, but her windburn was clearing up. She was pale as a corpse. "Honey, you look a hundred years old," he said softly. "I wouldn't lie down and stay still very long if I were you. Someone might want to shovel you under." She opened her eyes and for a moment he was startled. He had not noticed how very green they were before. Or now they looked greener against her pale skin. There was hatred in her gaze; when a woman is on the downhill slide of thirty-five, she doesn't want to be told she looks like hell, he thought maliciously. He regretted his own impulse to make her open her eyes and acknowledge his presence; now she looked more alive. Coolly he said, "I'm leaving your contracts on the table. I think he's coming. Remember, I'm Richard Vos."

He had heard steps on the porch, but no automobile noises in the driveway. It was the kid, come over to check first. He nodded, it was as he had expected. He opened the door and admitted Carmen who was carrying a paper sack.

"Mrs. Taney, how are you?" Carmen hurried to her and took her hand in both of his, studying her face. Lasater noticed that his fingers went to her pulse. Medical school

dropout? Paramedic? He made a mental note to check it out.

“Don't try to talk,” Carmen said, rising then. “I brought some soup. I'll just heat it up for you. Have you eaten anything at all since you left?”

“A little,” she whispered in her hoarse voice.

“Soup is what you need,” Carmen said and went to the kitchen where he shrugged off his coat and tossed it over a chair, and then rummaged for a pan.

“If you think you can manage,” Lasater said, “I'll be going. I'm susceptible to viruses and bacteria and things like that. Get a sore throat if anyone within a mile coughs, you know. I tried to get a doctor, but there aren't any in Salmon Key. I'll be going back to the Lagoon Park.” He was keeping his distance from Lyle, watching her as if afraid she might sneeze in his direction without warning. He snatched up his coat and tossed it over his shoulders and opened the door. “If you need me, you know. But I can't do anything. I don't know a thing about how to care for sick people.”

Inside the motor home he snapped to Follett, “Let's go. Back to the park.”

“What the hell's going on?”

“Never mind. We're leaving. At the first turn, I'm going to stop and you get out, go back up here and keep an eye on things. Werther's got to come over. The kid will either call him or go collect him when he thinks the coast is clear. She's really sick.”

He drove slowly, unable to see more than two feet ahead through the fog. Grumbling, Follett left the motor home when he stopped, and Lasater continued down the highway. Visibility was so poor it would take him nearly an hour to get back to the park. If Taney could drive in it in her shape, he thought, so could he. He reached the bottom of the drive and stopped, trying to remember if the road had the white line on the side all the way, or only on curves, trying to remember if the road curved between here and the bridge.

“This is silly,” Lyle said, as Carmen held out a spoonful of the clear strong broth he had brought from the other house. “I can feed myself.”

“I know,” he said, smiling. “Open up. This is fun.”

“Carmen, wait a second. I have to tell you something. That man who was here, he's an agent of some kind. He's after Saul. You have to warn him.”

“We already know,” Carmen said. “Open up, you're almost done.”

She swallowed, then shook her head when he offered another spoonful. “You know?”

“Not who he's working for. But it's been pretty obvious that there are people watching us.”

Lyle felt childishly disappointed, as if she had run a mile to warn of robbers only to find them already safely locked up.

Carmen looked at his watch, then said, "Now a hot bath for you, and then bed. Hold up your foot."

He pulled her boots off, as he had done another night, she remembered. She had forgotten that night. Again it alarmed her that she was not more fearful of the lapse, not at all fearful about it, in fact. He met her gaze and his face was somber.

"You'll gradually remember it all now. By morning when you wake up, it will all be there waiting for you to examine. You're not afraid?"

She shook her head.

"Good. I'll go fix the bath for you."

A few minutes later he said, at her bedroom door, "Yell when you get in bed. I'll tuck you in." His grin was back; he looked like a precocious child enjoying enormously this reversal of roles.

She didn't dare remain in the tub more than a few minutes; she had become so relaxed that she feared falling asleep and sinking forever under the water. Regretfully she got out, toweled herself, rubbed her hair briskly, and pulled on her gown. She was as eager now to be in bed as she had been to be in the tub. When she called Carmen her eyes were too heavy to keep them open. She was in a time-distorting presleep state that made it seem to take him a very long time to get to the bed, but when he was there, his voice close to her, she was startled that he had arrived so quickly.

"You're going to sleep like a baby," he murmured, and touched her shoulder lightly, drew the cover up closer to her neck. "You won't hear anything at all until morning. I'll be here tonight, no one will come in to bother you. Good night, Lyle." He kissed her forehead. She slept.

Driving the motor home at any time was difficult for Lasater, who had never driven anything like it before this trip. He had trouble getting used to the rearview mirrors, which more often than not seemed focused on the sides of the monster itself instead of the road. And he did not like the feel of it on the highway; it was too high, the weight was in the wrong place, it felt skittery if there was a glaze of ice or a slick of water on the road, and that night fog was freezing to form black ice. He feared black ice more than an ice storm, because it was invisible; it formed in one place but not another that was equally exposed. The road surface of the bridge was already covered, and he skidded alarmingly. He shifted gears and slowed down even more, wondering if he would be able to pull the grade up to the top of the hill between here and the lagoon.

He had passed Werther's driveway and was starting up the hill, when he heard a car engine roaring somewhere in the fog. His first thought was that it was an idiot

speeding on the coast road, driving blind. Then he heard a crash, and he knew someone had gone off the cliffs behind him. He yanked on the brake and got out, ran back on the white line at the edge of the road.

“Turk?” he called. “What the hell's going on?”

“Mr. Lasater? Where are you?”

The fog scrambled directional signals; it was impossible to say where any sound originated. Only the surf remained constant, and it was everywhere.

“Hey!” Turk yelled then. “Stop, where you think you're going?”

“Get out of the way! I'm going down to find him.” Carmen's voice.

Lasater crossed the road; he could hear scuffling sounds now, then a sharp exclamation followed by harsh cursing.

“Turk, what's happening?” he called again.

“The old guy came down like a bat outta hell, picking up speed all the way, didn't even try to stop, but straight through and over the cliff. The kid's just gone down the trail. Must have radar.”

“Call Follett. Tell him to meet you at Werther's house and give it a good dusting. Give me your flashlight. I'm going down there.”

Turk began to signal to Milton Follett, then said softly, “Jesus H. Christ! Look!”

Up the hillside the fog was lighted from within as if by volcanic fumes. There was a glow in the form of a mammoth aureole.

“That bastard! That goddamned fucking bastard,” Lasater muttered. “Get up there with Follett, see if anything's left.” He snatched the flashlight from Turk and looked for the trail down to the beach.

By midnight the fire had burned itself out; the woods had not ignited; they were too wet and the moist fog had acted as a damper. The house had burned thoroughly, down to the foundation stones. Carmen sat huddled in a blanket near the stove in Lyle's house, his clothes drying on chairs. Lasater sat on the couch staring moodily at the exhausted boy, who had tried to find the car for over an hour until, retching and gagging, he had staggered from the pounding surf into Lasater's arms. The police had come and gone; they would be back at daybreak to look for the car and the body. Accidental death, they said.

Except, Lasater thought coldly, no one was dead yet. He did not believe Werther had been in the car when it went over the cliff, no matter what Turk thought he saw. Werther had to be waiting somewhere nearby, freezing his balls off in the woods, waiting for the coast to clear enough to show up here at this house. Taney wasn't out of it yet. Werther must be planning to use her to get him out of here.

Lasater slept on the couch that night; Carmen rolled up in the blanket and slept on the floor. At dawn he was up cleaning Taney's car with Lasater watching every movement, thinking she was more of a pig than he had realized. Carmen made coffee then, and presently said he was going shopping and would be happy to drop Lasater off at the park. When they went out, the trunk lid was still raised, airing out, and the back doors were open. Lasater felt a cold fury when the thought came to him that the boy was playing games with him, demonstrating that he was not hauling Werther out of the woods that morning.

Lyle awakened slowly, first semi-aware that she was in her own bed again, that she was warm and dry and comfortable, and hungry; and slowly she began to remember the two evenings she had spent at Saul's house. She sat upright and pulled the blanket around her.

All those questions! He had examined her as thoroughly as any medical doctor had ever done. And she had permitted it! She closed her eyes hard, remembering. He had said she was to feel no fear or embarrassment, and she had felt neither; it had seemed the most natural thing in the world. She was startled by the memory of telling him all about Lasater, her involvement with him. Saul had known since that first night, and still had treated her with kindness and even love. The second night swam up in her consciousness and she shook her head almost in disbelief. He had injected her with something, and the rest of the night he had monitored her closely, her temperature, her pulse, her heart ... She looked at her finger; he had taken a blood sample. Except for the physical examination, which had taken place in the bedroom, Carmen had watched it all, had participated.

As she remembered both evenings, snatches of conversations came back to her; they had talked seriously of so many things. She had been lucid, not doped or hypnotized, or unnatural in any way that she could recall now. But she had allowed it all to happen, and then she had forgotten, and had accepted not remembering. He had told her about that part of it: a drug in the sweet wine, suggestion. He had even said that if she truly objected to anything, she would refuse the suggestion. And she had refused nothing. Except, she amended, she had left the next morning although he had told her to wait for Carmen.

Slowly she got up and went to the bathroom. As she showered, more and more of that last evening came back to her. Just before telling her to wake up he had asked if she wanted to sleep there, in his house, and she had said no. She remembered thinking at the time that there was something she had to do the next morning, something she would not be able to do from his house. She had already made up her mind to leave so that Lasater could not use her to get to Saul. And she had to be home in order to carry out her intention. If he had asked even one question about her reasons, she would have told him, she knew, but he had not asked. He had suggested that she should wait for Carmen to come for her.

It was nine o'clock when she finished with her shower, dressed, and was ready to

face Carmen. She was still weak, but she felt now that it was due to hunger, not illness. The house was empty. Coffee was on the hot plate. She poured herself a cup of it and sat down to read a note from Carmen on the table. He had gone shopping for breakfast. Back soon.

She was still sipping the strong coffee when he returned. He looked her over swiftly. "I'd say the patient is recovering," he announced. "What is prescribed for this morning is one of the biggest steaks you've ever tackled. Bet you finish it all."

"I've never had steak for breakfast in my life. Toast sounds like plenty." She wanted to challenge him, demand an explanation, but she was too hungry. After breakfast she would have her confrontation with Saul, not with Carmen who was simply a tool.

"Wait and see." He was unloading grocery bags and putting things away. When he unwrapped the steak, she almost laughed. Big enough for a party. While the steak was broiling, he opened a package of frozen peaches and sliced a banana into a bowl with them. She eyed it hungrily. He laughed and moved it out of reach.

"Dessert," he said.

Then he brought two plates out of the oven where they had been warming, and they ate.

Lyle was on her second cup of coffee when Lasater arrived. He scowled at the table. "Surprised you can eat on a morning like this.

"What does that mean?" Lyle asked. She had a dim memory that he was pretending to be someone from her publisher's office, and Carmen was pretending to believe that.

"They're searching up and down the beach for Werther's body," he said bluntly. "No luck so far."

She dropped her cup — it hit the saucer and toppled over, spilling coffee on the table. She turned to Carmen who nodded.

"He had an accident last night. He drove his car over the cliff."

Lyle did not move. She was trying to remove herself so far that she could see the house, the cliffs, the road, beach, forests, everything as she had seen it all in a dream once. So far back that nothing could touch her ever again. Faintly she could hear Lasater talking about a blood-stained car, one shoe, the wool knit, navy-blue cap that Saul always wore. The distance seemed even greater when Lasater said something about leaving that afternoon. She was brought back when Carmen covered her hand with his.

"He's gone, Lyle. Are you okay?" She nodded. He began to wipe up the spilled coffee.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You had to eat something. I knew you wouldn't afterward."

"What happened? Was it something I did?"

“No. There was a fire at the house and he went out in the car and the car went over the cliff. That's all they know about it.”

“Is he really leaving?”

“I don't know. Maybe.”

She nodded. They needed the body to make their identification. She started to speak again, but Carmen put his finger on her lips, silencing her.

Late in the afternoon she felt so restless that she could no longer stand the house and the waiting for something, anything to happen.

“Let's go for a short walk,” Carmen said. “Are you up to it?”

She said yes. All day she had felt stronger and stronger until by now she felt almost normal. Her recovery was proceeding as rapidly as the illness had done. Carmen drove to the beach they had walked on before; he went closer to the black rocks to park this time.

Today the sky was gray and low, pressing on the tops of the coast range mountains, making the world seem very small, confined to this winter beach. The water was a shade darker gray, undulating with long swells, breaking up into white water where the wind waves rushed to shore. They walked slowly, not speaking.

That was where they had investigated the tide pools, exclaiming over the multicolored life forms there, the starfish, urchins, crabs ... And over there she had found the blue float after its journey of many decades. And there they had eaten their lunch, and Saul had put the Styrofoam cup in his pocket to throw away later. And Saul had talked about the way the ocean savaged the winter beach when so few people were around to witness its maniacal fury.

“it seems lonesome,” she had said, looking both ways on the deserted beach.

“It has a presentiment of endings now,” Saul had said. “Endings of life, of pleasure, of laughter in the sand. The winter beach is lonesome, but it fights back. Each grain of sand wrested from it is fought for, yielded finally, but never easily. And in the summer, very peacefully it all comes back, scoured clean by the mother ocean. But in the winter, that's always forgotten.”

Gray, black, white; the winter beach was a charcoal drawing today, chiaroscuro colors that reflected her guilt, Lyle thought suddenly. And her guilt lay over every corner of her soul, every phase of her life. Her child, her ruined marriage, her failure as a teacher, her loss of faith both religious and secular ... Her helplessness even. Had she told Saul why she had lost faith in history as it was taught? She could not remember. She hoped she had.

One day it had occurred to her that every great change brought about historically had been the result of a very few people, men usually, who were driven by the basest impulses: greed, the urge to ever more power, vengeance ... The great majority of people had always been content to work their land, to mold their pots, weave cloth, do the life-sustaining things that were also soul-fulfilling; and the great majority of the

people had always been manipulable by those few, ten percent or less, whose needs were so far removed from simple survival and personal salvation.

Saul had understood that, even if she had not explained her loss of faith. He had been interested in the other people, the ones with great ideas, the ones who created beauty, the ones who had tried to comprehend the mysteries.

Saul had been her natural ally, she thought dully, and by silence and inaction she had failed him, she had betrayed him; she had allowed herself to be used by Lasater who was a member of that minority.

And that was how they always succeeded, she went on, taking it to its conclusion, allowing herself no excuse, no possibility of deliverance from guilt; they found people who were too weak to resist, who were too afraid, too apathetic, too ignorant of their methods, and they wielded them like swords to strike down or capture the opposition. She had recognized Lasater immediately, had known his goals were not hers, were not even human, and she had done nothing. She had tried to ignore evil, deny its ability to influence her, and now Saul was dead and she would always know that she might have saved him if she had spoken early, before the trap was too tight, before Lasater and the blond man came. Just a few words in the beginning might have been enough. And she had done nothing.

And if Saul had been crazy, if he had killed people? She could not resolve the confusion in her mind about him, about how she had responded to him, about the grief and sense of loss she now suffered.

“You're crying,” Carmen said, his hand on her arm.

She bowed her head and wept, and he held her for a long time until finally she tried to free herself. “I'm sorry,” she said. “It's so pointless, isn't it? I didn't even know him. And he must have been very sick, he must have suffered terribly. No one like that can go around killing people and not suffer. He almost killed me. I know he almost killed me and yet, I can't help it, I'm crying for a madman who would have been put away if he hadn't killed himself, and I know he wanted it this way...” There was no way out of the contradictions and finally she stopped. When she looked at Carmen's face, she realized he was laughing silently.

Stiffly she drew away and started to walk toward the car. “You can't deny that he tried to kill me and almost succeeded. That injection of his, you were there, you know about it.”

“It was a gamble,” Carmen said, still smiling slightly. “But you were dying anyway.”

“That's a lie. There wasn't a thing wrong with me before that shot. I had a life expectancy of at least thirty years.”

“Exactly,” Carmen said. “This walk has probably been too much for you so soon after your illness. Let's go home and have dinner.”

She opened her mouth to respond, then clamped it shut again and got inside the car where she sat staring out the window all the way home. He was as crazy as Saul, she

reminded herself.

Lyle saw a speck in the distance and knew the eagle was coming home finally. Every day there had been fresh evidence of the arrival of at least one of the pair, and now it was coming. She watched the speck gain definition, become separate parts. A wing dipped and the bird made a great sweeping curve, and she could see the tail feathers spread like a fan, rippling now and then as it made adjustments in its flight. She could see the white head, gleaming in the sun; it was looking at something below, turning its head slightly; it abandoned whatever had attracted it and looked ahead again. She was watching it through the view finder of her camera, snapping pictures as it came nearer. It cupped its wings, its feet reached out before it, and then it was on the spur, settling its wings down along its sides, stretching its neck. She snapped a few more shots of it as it preened, and then she sat back with her camera at her side and simply watched it. If the eagle was aware of her presence, it gave no indication of it. She was certain those sharp eyes had studied her blind, that they had seen her that day. There was a touch of majesty in its indifference to her.

Throughout the afternoon the eagle toiled at refurbishing the nest. It brought long strands of seaweed, and mosses, and sticks up to four feet long to expand the sides, and it worked the materials into place with an intentness and fastidiousness that was awesome.

Under the tree was a circle of litter; the eagle had picked out materials that had been good enough last year, but no longer pleased it. Old moss, old fern fronds, sticks. With an almost reckless abandon it tossed them over the side. When the light began to fade, Lyle picked her way back down the hillside, around the ruins of Saul's house, through the creek and to her own house, where Carmen was waiting for her.

She had not asked Carmen to stay, but neither had she asked him to leave; it was as if they both accepted that he would remain with her for now. The matter had come up only indirectly when she had said she couldn't pay him, and he had shrugged. For eight days he had been with her in the same relationship apparently that he had had with Saul. He did the shopping, a little cleaning, cooking; he prowled the beaches and brought home clams or scallops or crabs, sometimes a fish. Best of all they talked for hours in the evenings, never about Saul, or Carmen's past, but of history, current affairs, art, music ... Lyle knew that one day he would get restless and drift on, but she refused to think about it and the hollow in her life that would result.

When she entered the house that day, the odors of cooking food and woodsmoke and the elusive scent of another person greeted her. She felt nearly overcome by contentment, she thought happily.

“Carmen! He's home. He's beautiful! A wing span over eight feet. All day he's been fixing up the nest, getting ready for his lady love to join him. Tomorrow you have to come up with me and see for yourself.” She was pulling off her outer wear as she talked, unable to restrain the excitement she seemed filled to overflowing with. “I can't wait to see the pictures.”

She stopped at the look on Carmen's face, a look of such tenderness and love it made her knees weak.

"I'll come up tomorrow. Maybe I can help you in the dark room after dinner."

She nodded. And still they looked at one another and she wondered when she had stopped looking at him as if he were only a boy, when he had stopped looking at her as if she were untouchable.

Then she said, "I'm filthy. I'd better get washed up and change these muddy clothes." She fled. She was afraid he was laughing at her confusion.

They had dinner and worked in the darkroom for two hours. She felt like purring over the proof sheets; at least half a dozen of the pictures would go in, maybe more. Throughout the evening she avoided his gaze, and spoke only of eagles, her day in the blind, the dinner itself. She began to make notes to go with the pictures, and found herself writing a poem instead. When she finished, she felt almost exalted.

"May I read it?" Carmen asked. She handed it to him silently.

He read it twice, then said, "I like it very much. It would make a good introduction to the book. I didn't know you wrote poetry."

"I don't. I mean I haven't before, not since college days." She took the sheet of paper back and reread her poem.

*The dead tree flies an eagle on the wind,
Then steadily reels it in,
Dip, sway, soar, rise,
All the time closer.
To the left, to the right,
Now too low, now too high,
But closer.
From nothing, to a speck
That could be a cloud,
To a being coming home,
It takes shape:
Sun on snow, the head,
Great wings without a waver,
White fan as graceful
And delicate as a black one
In a pale practiced hand.
From the tree's highest crotch,
From a nest of branches, sticks, twigs, moss,
Elaborate skyscraper room,
A silent summons was sent.
Now the dead tree reels the eagle home.*

Abruptly she stood up. "I guess I'd better get to bed. I want to be up there early. I

expect the other one will come in tomorrow or the next day.”

In a scruffy camper in Lagoon Park Hugh Lasater played the tape over again, listening to their voices intently, following them through dinner, into the darkroom where their voices were almost too low to catch, back to the living room. He wished one of them had read the poem aloud. He heard their good nights, her door closing, Carmen's movements in the living room for another fifteen minutes; then the long silence of the night started. He turned off the tape player. Something, he kept thinking. There was something he should be catching. He rewound it and started over.

What he did not hear, because the device was activated by sounds and this was done in silence, was the opening of Lyle's door at one-thirty. She stepped into the living room to look at Carmen sleeping on the couch, and when she saw him instead at the window that overlooked the sea, she did not retreat. Instead, after a slight hesitation, he came to her, barefoot, visible in the red glow from the glass door of the wood stove. He reached out his hand and she, after a slight hesitation, took it, and together they went back to her bedroom and softly closed the door.

Hugh Lasater listened again, and in the middle of the tape, he suddenly slapped the table top hard, waking up Milton Follett on the bunk bed.

“Son of a bitch!” Lasater said. “The camera bag. Where was it when the house burned down?”

Follett regarded him with hatred, rolled over, and went back to sleep.

Lasater had not been asking him; he already knew about the camera bag. Follett was good at certain jobs; he could watch and report movements down to a casual scratching of the head. And Follett had said that Carmen showed up with the bag at Taney's house when she was gone, and he had left with it. He had not been seen with it again. So Werther considerately put it on a stump out of danger before he set the house afire?

Lasater mused about the boy for a long time that night. He knew photography enough to help Taney in the darkroom. He remembered that sure way he had taken her pulse when she returned from her little jaunt. They had only his word that he had been hired by Werther in Los Angeles; if that was true what had made him jump into that crazy surf in an effort to find the old man. No one risked death for someone he had known only a couple of months, and that surf was a killer. Someone had to make sure that the car door had not jammed shut, Lasater said to himself. That would have screwed it up royally, if there had been no way Werther could have been thrown out. They had waited for the right kind of night with a pea-soup fog for their little charade; maybe the kid even had a rope guide to take him to where he had figured the car would land. No one paid much attention to him; he was always on the beach prowling around.

Lasater knew his foremost problem now was to convince Mr. Forbisher that his

theory was right, that Werther had not been in that car, and that the boy would lead them back to him sooner or later. Turk was convinced that he had seen Werther go over the cliff; Follett believed him, but Follett would have bought anything to get him off this job. He hated the rain and wind and cold weather, and he hated the isolation here. He wanted a woman. When they got back to civilization, Follett would vanish a day or two. There would then be a news item about a woman's body being found ... It was one of those things with Follett, a little weakness of his. Lasater could sympathize with his frustration even while his own frustration mounted to a dangerous level. Even Lasater had to admit that he no longer believed Werther was hiding out in the woods now. Not for eight days. In another day August Ranier would show up, listen to the arguments for continuing the hunt, make his evaluation, report to Forbisher by phone, and then render the decision. Lasater's mouth tightened as he repeated the phrases to himself, all so legal sounding, so proper and genteel.

He was certain they would not continue to pay the small army Lasater had brought to the coast to watch the old man and the kid. Maybe one operator, or two at the most. They might go for that. He could bring in someone who would get in close to Carmen, and stay close to him. A girl, he thought then, remembering Carmen's body as he had stripped in Taney's house. Even blue with cold and shaking almost uncontrollably, he had been good-looking, so young and unmarked it had been like a stab to Lasater. Hell, he thought, the kid was human, he must be almost as horny by now as Follett. If he could produce a girl who looked even younger, who looked hurt and vulnerable, who asked for nothing and apparently expected nothing, a runaway with a car of her own, a little money, Carmen would figure he could use her to get him to where he had to go. And where he had to go, Lasater had convinced himself, was home to Saul Werther.

“Look,” Lyle said softly. “She's pretending she hates it. That's stuff he just brought in yesterday.” The female eagle was discarding seaweed vigorously; the male sat on a nearby tree watching her.

Carmen laughed. There was mist beyond the blind; it was too fine and too gentle to call rain, it was rather as if a cloud were being lowered very slowly to earth. Carmen had joined Lyle only minutes earlier; there were mist beads on his hair.

She had been afraid the morning might be awkward, but he had been up when she awakened, and when she had gone into the living room he had kissed her gently on the nose and had continued to make breakfast.

The female eagle reared up and half-opened her wings threateningly when the male approached the nest. He veered away and returned to his perch. “All in the genes,” Carmen said in a hushed voice. “She's doing what nature programmed her to do.”

Why this pretense of free will? Lyle wondered. She knew the female might pretend to become too disgusted with the nest, with the male; she might pretend to leave, might even go through some motions of starting a new nest. And in the end they would

mate here and the fledglings would hatch out and learn to fly from that dead spur.

She found herself wondering about her own attempts to escape Lasater's plans, to free herself from the burden of betraying Saul, her own mock flight to freedom.

From any distance at all, it now seemed as programmed as the eagles' behavior, at least her actions and Lasater's. Only Saul and Carmen had been unpredictable.

Suddenly she felt that they had been from the start as alien to her as the eagles were, as strange and unknowable. And it had not mattered, she thought, and did not matter now.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Carmen asked.

"I was thinking that you and Saul came to Earth from a distant planet, that you're aliens. They won't find his body because he changed himself at the last moment into a great snowy owl and sailed away in the fog. He could come back as a butterfly, or an eagle, or whatever he chooses."

"I hope Lasater doesn't start believing that," Carmen said, laughing. "He might get the Marines out."

"Oh, no. He thinks that Saul was a Jewish student in Hitler's Germany and that he discovered something tremendous..."

She stopped at the change that came over Carmen's features. He leaned toward her and suddenly there was nothing boyish about him, nothing soft or tender.

"Tell me what he said."

"That last morning he stopped me as I was leaving, when I was ill ... She told him all of it. He did not move, but she felt more alone than she had felt in her life, as if a barrier that could never be scaled had come up between them.

"It's true, isn't it?" she whispered.

"Essentially. Some details are wrong. David's two younger brothers died young with Tay-Sachs Disease, and it nearly killed his mother. David and his older brother Daniel swore they would find a vaccine for it. But Daniel just couldn't make it in school. He dropped out, David went on. The professor was already into genetic research, and he allowed David to pursue his own studies because he saw that the two would come together at a later date. When the two lines did converge they realized they had something they had not counted on. The professor was terrified that the German government would get it, he was vehemently antifascist, and of course there was the danger that David would be picked up and forced to work in a government lab somewhere. So they kept it very secret, kept the papers on the farm the professor's family had owned for two centuries. David's brother knew what he was doing. When David was called up for registration, fingerprinting, the works, Daniel went. No one noticed. All those Jew boys looked alike after all. So David never was on file actually. David's parents and Daniel were hauled away one day. He found out — they always found out rather quickly — and he returned to the laboratory that night to destroy certain cultures. The Hitler Youth gang caught him there carrying a culture dish across the laboratory. The culture had to be maintained

at blood heat or it perished. All he had planned to do was to put it in the refrigerator, because there was a danger of incriminating the professor if he actually destroyed anything in a way that could be proven. When the gang burst in on him, he dropped the dish. They threw him down on the mess and rubbed his face in it. Glass, culture, dirt ... Then they took him outside the building and beat him to a pulp, and they dragged him back to the professor's house, and left him on the steps." He paused. "The rest of it is pretty much as Lasater suggested, except that the professor wasn't dead. They escaped together with the paperwork."

"If his fingerprints aren't on file, why did it matter if Lasater got a set? It would have ended there when they didn't match up."

"David's prints aren't in anyone's file," he said slowly, gazing at the eagles' nest. "But the professor's are. We simply couldn't be certain they wouldn't be available for comparison."

"You're saying that Saul is that professor. What about David?" Her voice sounded harsh and unfamiliar to her; she had to make a great effort to speak at all. She was caught up in a battle against disbelief and despair: Carmen was mad, as mad as Saul had been.

"You know I'm David," he said gently, as if only now becoming aware of her distress. "Don't look so scared. You really did know already. Watch the eagles this afternoon. I'm going down to the beach. See you for dinner." He leaned forward and kissed her lips lightly, and then was gone.

Dry-eyed, she stared at the eagles' nest. Crazy. Paranoid delusions. It had to be that. Gradually she found that she was accepting that he was mad and that she didn't care, it didn't matter. He had to be insane, or she had to accept something that had kept him twenty for all those years, that had stopped Saul at sixty-four and held him there. Something that had made them both immortal. And she could not accept immortality.

The female eagle returned with fresh seaweed to replace that which she had discarded; her token resistance was ended. The male followed with a long scrap of white material he had found somewhere. Together they rearranged the interior of their nest.

The sun came out and steam rose throughout the forest; the air was heavy with spring fragrances and fertile earth and unnamable sea smells.

And still Lyle sat staring, not taking pictures, trying to think of nothing at all. She would not think about tomorrow or the next day. She would do her job and if Carmen stayed, she would love him; when he left, she would miss him. Each day was its own beginning and ending. That was enough.

But she knew it was not enough. Carmen had pointed out the listening device on the underside of the table in her house. Lasater was still out there, listening, spying. Maybe he thought Carmen would lead him to the papers he so desperately wanted. Maybe Carmen could go to them. And, she thought suddenly, she was still here for

Lasater to use. He had put her here, he thought of her as his instrument, his property to use when he got ready, to discard afterward, and so far she had not worked for him. The next time he would use her without trying to force cooperation, without her awareness or consent. When he started moving pieces again, he would turn to her and make use of her, she felt certain. Like the winter beach, she felt buffeted by forces she could not comprehend or thwart or dodge, and like the winter beach she felt a presentiment of endings, a loss of laughter in the sand.

August Ranier had come and gone and Lasater had been stripped of his army with a single word spoken very quietly. "Do I continue?" he had asked.

"No."

Ranier had handed Milton Follett and Lasater their termination checks — they had been hired as consultants — and he had left in his dawn-gray Seville.

"Let's get out of here," Follett said.

"Aren't you willing to wait to pick up your bug in the house?"

"Yeah. I'm driving the camper up there. That little baby cost me sixty-three bucks. Let's go."

"Milt, hold it a minute. Listen, I know that old man's alive and well somewhere and the kid's going home to him one of these days. I know it just like I know the back of my hand. Now that Forbisher's out of it, we could double the price when we get the stuff. You and I, Milt, just the two of us. A million, two million..."

"Milt turned on the key and jerked the camper away from its parking spot. He did not even bother to look at Lasater.

"Milt!" Lasater said softly. "Remember Karen?"

The camper shuddered to a stop and Milton Follett started up from behind the driver's seat. His hands were clenched.

"Would you like another Karen?" Lasater asked, whispering the words.

Follett was pale and his fists opened, the fingers spread wide, then clenched again.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll let you have Taney."

Follett sat down on the bunk bed. "Tell me," he said.

"What if the cops find her messed up, dead, her money, jewelry, car all gone? What do you suppose they'll think, especially since the old guy disappeared so mysteriously such a short time ago? They'd wonder why a good-looking kid like Carmen was hanging around an old dame like her. But you can have her first, as long as you want, whatever you want."

"Why?"

“I want that kid to run home to papa. He'll run when he finds her. He'll know they'll be after him, he's not a dope. He'll run and we'll be there. Who's the best team in the business, Milt? Not Turk and that bunch of amateurs. You think there's any way in the world the kid can shake us? I think he'll take us home with him.”

“When?”

“We need a car. One of us has to go up to Coos Bay and get a car, and then we're all set.”

“You,” Follett said. “Too many people recognize me. You paying?”

“Yep. All the way. I pick up all expenses.”

Milton Follett continued to study the idea. Lasater could tell when he stopped considering it and let his mind drift to Lyle Taney; a film of perspiration put a shine on his forehead.

Outside, the rain started again. It was like a drum beat on the metal roof.

Lasater was not even certain he had heard a knock on the door until he opened it to see Lyle Taney there with rain running off her. She was dressed in her down jacket and jeans, boots; her hood was pulled low on her forehead. She looked like a commercial for a hikers' club. He grinned at her and stepped aside to allow her to enter. She pushed the hood back and stood dripping on the rug.

“My God,” Lasater said. “You look great! I've never seen you look better!” Her lips were soft without any trace of chapping now; her eyes were clear and bright, as green as sea water; her face glowed, the windburn totally gone. She had swept Follett with one quick glance, and now was looking at Lasater steadily.

“I think the lady wants to talk to me in private,” he said to Follett.

“Raining too hard,” Follett said, not shifting his gaze from Lyle Taney.

“What can I do?” Lasater asked helplessly. “He's bigger than both of us. You want a cup of coffee? Let's get that jacket off, dry out a little.” He made no motion, but continued to study her, the changes in her. Always before she had kept herself way back where she thought she was safe, but now she was right out front, not hiding at all. Her eyes blazed at him, straight on. Then he thought, she was sleeping with the kid! He was fascinated and disgusted by the idea.

“Why are you still here?” she asked. “What else do you want? You drove Saul Werther to his death. What more can you do?”

“He isn't dead, Lyle. Let's not pretend. Werther, the kid, you, me, we're all in this together. We've come too far to try to kid each other.”

“I'm warning you,” she said, “if you don't get out of here and leave Carmen alone, and leave me alone, I'm going to call the sheriff's office and the nearest FBI office and anyone else I can think of and make a loud noise about an ex-agent and an

ex-football player who keep threatening and harassing me.”

“Baby, I'm on their side. National security takes precedence over local affairs every time.”

“You're a liar, Mr. Lasater. I intend to make those calls if you don't get out of here and leave us alone.”

Lasater laughed and reached past her to lean against the door. “Honey, what makes you think you'll be going anywhere to do any complaining?”

She did not move. “I asked everyone in the park which camper you and the football player were in,” she said evenly. “Two tents, a motor home, two campers, and a trailer. Some of the boys thought it was neat to be camping out next to Milton Follett. They might even ask for an autograph.”

Follett made a sound deep in his chest, a grunt, or a groan.

Lyle continued to watch Lasater. “Just so there wouldn't be any excuse to delay,” she said, “I brought you this.” She took her hand from her pocket and tossed the bug onto the bunk bed.

“She's lying,” Lasater said to Follett then. “She doesn't want cops asking that kid questions any more than we do.”

“Let her go,” Follett said. He had stopped watching her and now was looking at Lasater murderously. “She's been using my name around here. Let her go.”

He was infuriated because the plum had been yanked out of reach, Lasater knew. There would be no way of getting him to cooperate again soon if she walked out the door. “Let's take off, go down the beach a ways and decide how to handle this.”

“You'll have to move my car,” Lyle said. “It's blocking you. One of you will have to go out and move it, and some of the people I talked to will be curious enough to be watching—” Now she looked at Follett, as if she knew he was the one to work on. “I left a note for Carmen, telling him I was coming here. If he comes down, and he will, and finds all of us gone, he'll call the police fast.”

“He put you up to this, didn't he?” Lasater demanded.

“You win because no one really opposes you,” she said, and there was a new intensity in her voice. “I tried to close my eyes to what you were, what you were doing, trying to make me do. But I'm not afraid anymore, Mr. Lasater.”

She was telling the truth; she was not afraid. He knew it, and he realized that Milton Follett knew it. For a moment the tableau held. Then, as if from a great distance, Lasater heard himself mutter, “Oh, my God!” and suddenly he knew what it was the old man had found. “It wasn't a cancer cure, was it?” he whispered. Wildly he turned from her toward Follett. “I know what it was! Look at her!”

Follett was moving the few steps that separated him from the other two. Savagely he jerked Lasater away from the door. “Get the hell out of here,” he said to Lyle.

She left. She had not yet reached her car when the camper shook as if a heavy weight had been slammed against the side of it. She did not look back, but got inside her car and put the key in the ignition.

She started the car, left the camping area, climbed the steep gravel driveway.

He used it on me, she thought clearly, and it seemed as if the rain had come inside the car, was blurring her vision. She saw Carmen on the road and stopped for him. He examined her face quickly.

“You could have been hurt!”

“But not killed?”

For a moment he was silent. She started the car again and drove south, toward the beach where they had walked with Saul.

“You could be killed,” he said then. “But you could be hurt and hurt and hurt for a long time first.”

She nodded. “Why did you do it to me?”

“We need help. We have to stay together in case one of us gets hurt. The other has to take care of him. No hospitals. No doctors. There are a few others, but they all have work to do, and some of us have to be able to travel here and there.”

“To attend conferences, see who is getting too close.”

“Yes. Lyle, who would you hand it over to? Our government? A church leader? Who should be given it? Eight hundred million Chinese? Two and a half billion Asians? Four and a half billion of all of us? A scientific elite? The military? Who, Lyle?”

She shook her head. “You're as bad as Lasater. Judge, jury, executioner.”

“We know we are,” he said very quietly. She thought of the immensity of the sadness she had detected in Saul. “Four people so far have followed that line of research,” he said. “One of them was already spending his Nobel Prize money. I killed him and buried him.” His voice was very flat now; she did not want to look at his face. “One of them died following the injection. Two of them are back at work, helping us keep it undiscovered.”

They had reached the wide beach. Today the water was almost black under the low clouds and pounding rain. It was low tide, the waves were feeble. Lyle parked and they sat staring out at the endless sea. She thought of the story of the fisherman and his three wishes. This was her third trip to this winter beach. I wish ... I wish ... There was nothing to follow the words. Golden wings, she thought. She could wish for golden wings. Why me? she had wanted to demand of Lasater.

Why me?

“I don't want it,” she said. “I didn't ask for it. You didn't ask me if I agreed.”

“I know. If you had wanted it, we wouldn't have chosen you.”

“You can't make that decision for the rest of humanity. No one can make such a decision for everyone.”

“I know. We can't, but we have to, because if we don't someone else will. Who? You know the fears about an escaped genetic experiment? If a mutated virus got loose, there wouldn't be any way to stop it. There wouldn't be any way to stop this either. We're carriers. You're a carrier now. It's in the blood, in every cell of your body. A transfusion, sexual contact, that's all it takes. Think of the malnutrition here now with our four-and-a-half-billion population, and then start multiplying it endlessly. Parents, children, their children, all living forever until their metabolism stops because there's no food for them. They would hurt for an awfully long time before that happened, Lyle, and they would hurt very bad.”

She thought of the look on Follett's face back in the camper. She had recognized that look: cruelly possessive, hungry. Sexual contact. And the Folletts and the Lasaters would be the ones to get it. The others might all die, but not the Folletts and Lasaters of the world. Lasater knew, but it did not matter. No one believed him, and soon he would grow old, die. She looked at the sea, wishing for a sign, for a rainbow, a streak of gold at the horizon, anything to take the decision away from her. There was only the gray water rising and falling in slow swells, and the steady rain.

“I don't know any science,” she said finally. “What could I possibly do?”

“First, write your eagle book. We'll stay here and go on just as we've been doing. You'll become a rich reclusive woman. You'll travel around the world, taking pictures, talking to people. We need others, Lyle. You'll have to help me find the right ones, recruit them, sometimes bury them.”

Reclusive, she thought. Of course. Talk with many others, friends of none of them. No one could bear watching children age and die, watching friends suffer, grow old, die... “Others to do what?” she asked dully.

“At first we thought no one could ever have it, no one at all. It doesn't change you, you know. You don't gain wisdom. or courage, or anything else. You just keep living, exactly the way you are. But more recently we decided that if the world could change, if enough people could change ... I don't know if it will work. Sometimes I know it can't. But we have to try. A few people here and there, people like you who don't want power or glory, who don't want to drive others to do their bidding. Unwilling recruits every one, the most reluctant elite the world has ever seen.”

It was starting to get dark now; the clouds pressed closer against the ocean as if waiting for darkness to hide their possession of it. Lyle turned on the key. “We should get back before the fog comes in.” She did not engage the gears yet, but sat with the motor idling. “Why are you here, at this place?”

There was a long pause before he answered. “Sometimes we have to go somewhere far away from people, where there are things that haven't been changed much, where no one talks to us very much. There are a few mountains, places in the desert, upper Maine, here. We need a place where we can just live without having to think for a

while.”

Lyle nodded. When the pain gets too great to bear, you try to escape, she thought: the bottle, pills, sex; and when none of them gives more than a momentary surcease, you go to the woods, or to the winter beach.

“Saul is well then. It was a trick to get him out of here.”

“Yes. I had to wait to make certain you were with us. If your fever had gone too high, you might have killed off the genetic material we gave you. We couldn't know right away. Tomorrow I'll send a message to the *Times* personal column to let him know you're okay.”

Now she shifted gears and started to back up. “I know what the message should say. ‘Blue float has come ashore safely.’”

“Welcome home,” Carmen said in his most gentle voice. She thought of the eagles, beyond good and evil, the winter beach entering a transition now, going into spring, and then summer when the ocean would bring back the scrubbed sand, make amends. All ordered, necessary, unavoidable. She started the drive home.

About Kate Wilhelm

Kate Wilhelm is the author of more than thirty novels, including *Defence for the Devil* and *No Defence* and her fiction has been translated into many languages. She lives in Eugene, Oregon.